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THE RELATIONSHIP OF THE HEBREW PRIESTHOOD  
TO THE CANAANITE PRIESTHOOD

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A Thesis  
Presented to  
the Faculty of  
Asbury Theological Seminary

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In Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
Master of Theology

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by  
A. Chacko George  
May 1969

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TO THE CANAANITE PRIESTHOOD

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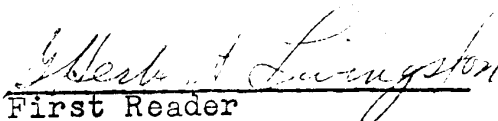
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Approved:

  
First Reader

  
Second Reader

by  
A. Chacko George

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## CHAPTER I

### THE PROBLEM AND DEFINITIONS OF TERMS USED

The religion of Israel, according to critical scholars, was the product of a long process of development. Needless to say the scholars are influenced by such concepts as Hegelian dialectic and Darwinian evolution. They hold that many of the beliefs and practices of the Israelites were "borrowed" from pagan neighbors, particularly from the Canaanites, whose material culture and civilization was higher than that of the Hebrews.

#### I. THE PROBLEM

Statement of the problem. The Israelites, who were semi-nomads, came into contact with Yahweh, who was originally the God of the Kenites.<sup>1</sup> Moses introduced Yahweh to the Israelites. After they had settled in Canaan, they adopted many of the customs and practices of the Canaanites, including many religious beliefs and practices. G. E. Wright observes:

It has been assumed that a considerable portion of Israel's allegedly unique contributions to religion were not her own. She borrowed from many sources and her uniqueness consisted in the alterations and improvements which she imposed upon what

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<sup>1</sup>T. J. Meek, "Some Religious Origins of the Hebrews," American Journal of Semitic Languages and Literatures, XXXVII (January, 1921), 103.

was borrowed.<sup>2</sup>

Among other things, Israel also borrowed cultic ideas, cultic shrines and cultic functionaries along with cultic ritual.

Otto Eissfeldt says:

Bethel, Gilgal, Shechem and other sanctuaries were certainly Canaanite sanctuaries before they became Israelite, and the Israelites have in many cases taken over the *ἱεροὶ λόγοι* belonging to them together with the places and their rituals, simply by putting their Yahweh in the place of the Canaanite numen who originally appeared in the story.<sup>3</sup>

The problem is therefore centered around the origin of the Hebrew priesthood. Was the Hebrew priesthood a modified form of the Canaanite priesthood or was it totally different from that of the Canaanite religion? It is this problem that will be examined in this study.

Importance of the study. Until recently, knowledge of the Canaanites was limited to a few references in the Bible, which were insufficient to form a clear picture of their cultural and religious life. Now, however, science of excavation has completely revolutionized man's knowledge of the ancient past. Archaeological excavations carried out in many biblical lands have brought new light upon the social,

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<sup>2</sup>G. E. Wright, The Old Testament Against Its Environment (London: SCM Press Ltd., 1950), p. 15.

<sup>3</sup>Otto Eissfeldt, Trans. Peter Ackroyd, The Old Testament, An Introduction (New York and Evanston: Harper and Row, 1965), p. 43.

cultural and religious life of many ancient races and nations. The Canaanites are no exception. Archaeologists have unearthed the ruins of many Canaanite cities and towns such as Jericho, Bethel-Ai, Libnah, Lachish, Eglon, Debir, Bethshan, Megiddo, Beth Shemesh, Biblos and Ras Shamra, all of them yielding invaluable information.<sup>4</sup> The accidental discovery of Ugarit (modern Rash Shamra) has added to the student's knowledge many ingredients which could not be furnished by the biblical data. The thousands of tablets which have been recovered from Ugarit are being studied and deciphered by scholars. The result is that today scholars are in a better position to judge the predecessors of the Hebrews with reference to their material culture and civilization, their religious beliefs and practices and their relation to and influence on the Israelites.

Objectives of this study. Certain authors have suggested that among other things the Israelites "borrowed" the cultic shrines as well as the cultic personnel from the Canaanites. They also argue that the office of the priesthood in Israel did not come into existence till the Hebrews were socially organized. The following examples set forth this point of view: Hans Joachim Kraus in Worship of Israel

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<sup>4</sup>M. S. Miller and J. L. Miller, "Canaan, Canaanites," Harper's Bible Dictionary (New York: Harper and Brothers Publishers, 1952), p. 89.

observes,

There is no element in the cultic tradition of the Old Testament which is not some way connected with the world of Canaanite religion. The worship of Israel did not fall down completely from heaven, but arose out of a keen struggle with the powerful religious forms and practices of the country.<sup>5</sup>

T. J. Meek says that the origin of the Hebrew priesthood can be traced back to the "earliest stage of social evolution and is doubtless to be found very close to the beginning of magical and religious practices."<sup>6</sup> Roland de Vaux argues that there is no evidence of a priesthood in the book of Genesis and that the Hebrew "priesthood properly so called did not appear until the social organization of the community had developed considerably."<sup>7</sup> H. H. Rowley contends that there was much that bound the Canaanite religion and the Hebrew religion and that "not a little of Canaanite origin has survived in Judaism."<sup>8</sup> The same author in The Faith of Israel observes:

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<sup>5</sup>Hans Joachim Kraus, Worship in Israel (Richmond, Virginia: John Knox Press, 1966), p. 36.

<sup>6</sup>T. J. Meek, Hebrew Origins (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1936).

<sup>7</sup>Roland de Vaux, Ancient Israel-Its Life and Institutions (New York: McGraw Hill Book Company, Inc., 1961), p. 345.

<sup>8</sup>H. H. Rowley, The Meaning of Sacrifice in the Old Testament (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1950).

We have ever larger knowledge of the background of semitic and particularly Canaanite, religion which lay behind and around the religion of Israel, and we see that much, even in Judaism, can no longer be regarded as special supernatural revelation given directly and specifically to Israel, but had its antecedents in Canaanite religion.<sup>9</sup>

Karl Budd makes the following remark about the relationship between the Hebrews and the Canaanites:

So Israel accommodated itself to a settled mode of life and to agriculture and thereby took the most important step which can be taken in the scale of human civilization. There was much to learn and in every thing, the Canaanite neighbour, whether conquered or free, was Israel's teacher.<sup>10</sup>

The statements cited above are but a few examples of what modern critical scholarship believes as to the origin and nature of the religion of Israel. These are statements that deserve attention, and the task at hand is to examine the validity of such a view as held by critical scholars.

The purpose of this study is to examine the problem of the relationship between Hebrew priesthood and Canaanite preisthood. The basic questions that need to be asked here are questions relating to the origin of Hebrew priesthood. Did Israel borrow the priesthood from the Canaanites? Are there any similarities between the two systems? What

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<sup>9</sup>H. H. Rowley, The Faith of Israel (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1956), p. 15.

<sup>10</sup>Karl Budd, Religion of Israel to the Exile (New York and London: G. P. Putnam's Sons, The Knickerbocker Press, 1899), p. 56.

differences can be observed between them? Was there any qualitative difference between the religion of the Hebrews and the religion of the Canaanites? It is to this problem that the present writer seeks to address himself.

Limits of the study. The study of the Hebrew priesthood will be limited to its origin and development from the time of Moses to the end of the monarchical period. It is not the purpose of this thesis to treat all the rituals connected with the priesthood and the temple, but only those factors which have a bearing on the problem under consideration will be dealt with. This study does not undertake to grapple with the problem of documentary hypothesis.

Sources and methodology. It must be admitted that the task of attempting a description of the early religious system of the Canaanites is not an easy one. Present knowledge of the religion of the Canaanites comes mainly from two sources.

First, there is the evidence of archaeology. The modern era of excavation began with the work of Macalister at Gezer which yielded valuable insights into the Canaanite religion: The Canaanite sanctuary, with its rock altars, sacred pillars, ashera and underground chambers was discovered. This discovery was supplemented by many subsequent discoveries made by outstanding archaeologists of recent times. The names of Crowfoot, Alan Rowe, John Garstang and

W. F. Albright deserve special mention. S. H. Hooke makes the following comment as to the importance of these discoveries:

Canaanite temples have been laid bare, examples of every kind of cult object have been recovered from their age long burial, and the main external pattern of religious life has been reconstructed from the results of excavation.<sup>11</sup>

The main source of archaeological evidence, however, is the Ras Shamra texts. W. F. Albright points out that "the rich new data from Ugarit are rapidly revolutionizing our approach to the history of Hebrew literature" and that everything which was written on the subject before the discovery and decipherment of the Ras Shamra texts stands in need of revision.<sup>12</sup> Nevertheless, archaeological evidence is only external and is limited in that it does not give any insight into the inner nature of religion.

The second source of information is the biblical data. While this is extremely important, it is also limited for two reasons.

1. The only source for the state of the Canaanite religion is the book of Genesis, and this book gives only some faint hints of the nature of the Canaanite religion; at

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<sup>11</sup>S. H. Hooke, The Origins of Early Semitic Ritual (London: Oxford University Press, 1968), p. 25.

<sup>12</sup>W. F. Albright, "The Old Testament World," The Interpreter's Bible, I, (New York: The Abingdon Cokesbury Press, 1952), p. 259.

best one can only make inferences about the religious practices of these people.

2. The few references concerning the relations between the Hebrews and the Canaanites are negative in nature. Direct information from Hebrew sources concerning Canaanite ritual is mainly limited to some ritual prohibitions.

Both of these sources, archaeological and biblical data, are of great importance to this study. The procedure is to compare the archaeological data with the biblical data to see whether it throws any light on the problem. The method is inductive, and any conclusion drawn will be based on objective evidence.

## II. DEFINITIONS OF TERMS USED

There are certain basic terms that need to be defined because of the various shades of meaning these words convey.

Hebrews, Israel (Israelites). Some scholars point out that the term "Hebrew" is an earlier term, which was replaced by "Israel" during the period of the Judges.<sup>13</sup> In this paper these two terms are synonymous and will be used interchangeably.

Canaan, Canaanites. There are some who claim that the word "Canaan" may be used either in a limited sense or a

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<sup>13</sup>H. M. Orlinsky, Ancient Israel (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1954), p. 19.



wider sense.<sup>14</sup> In this paper Canaan is used as a designation of the whole territory of Palestine west of Jordan and Syria. The Canaanites were the inhabitants of this territory at the time of Israel's entry into that land.

Ugarit, Ras Shamra and Ras Shamra texts. Ras Shamra is the modern name of ancient Ugarit, situated on the North coast of Syria. The terms will be used interchangeably here. The Ras Shamra texts (Ugaritic texts) refer to the thousands of clay tablets which were recovered from this place after an accidental discovery in 1929. These texts date from the early fourteenth century B. C. and constitute the most important corpus of ancient literature discovered in this century. Written in poetic and prosaic style, in a previously unknown cuneiform alphabet, the texts are currently being studied and interpreted by scholars.

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<sup>14</sup>A. Haldar, "The Canaanites," The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible, I (New York: Abingdon Press, 1962), p. 495.

## CHAPTER II

### CANAAN AND THE CANAANITES

For a better understanding of the relationship between the Hebrews and the Canaanites, it is imperative that one knows something of the background of the people who are called the "Canaanites." The concern of this chapter then, is to examine such aspects as the land and the people-with special reference to their civilization and religion-and their influence on the Hebrews upon the latter's arrival to the land. The procedure involves an examination of the etymology of the word "Canaan" and a study of the biblical and the archaeological data about the Canaanites.

#### I. THE LAND AND THE PEOPLE

Etymology of Canaan. The Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics observes that

the name "Canaan" first appears in the tell el-Amarna letters under the forms Kinahni and Kinahhi as a designation of the lands at the Eastern end of the Mediterranean, which we<sub>1</sub> include today under the names of Syrai and Palestine.<sup>1</sup>

The Ras Shamra texts also have references to Canaanites.<sup>2</sup> The etymology of the word is uncertain, but it is

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<sup>1</sup>J. Hastings, "Canaanites," Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1910), III, p. 177.

<sup>2</sup>B. Maisler, "Canaan and the Canaanites," Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research, CII (April, 1940), 7-12.

pointed out by some scholars that the word may have been derived from the Accadian kinahhu which means "red purple." Maisler points out that kinahhu is now known to be a special variety of tabarru, "red purple" mentioned several times with takiltu, "blue purple," and other dyes. He argues further that the term "Canaan," which was first used as an appellation of an important class or caste of traders, came to be used for the geographical area that includes Phoenicia and the Egyptian province of Syria in the fifteenth century B. C.<sup>3</sup>

If the etymological development of the word, as cited above, is correct, it must be admitted that "Canaan" originally meant a part of the Syrian coastal land, particularly Phoenicia, which used the purple snail to dye wool. Many scholars today are of the opinion that originally Canaan referred to a limited area which in the course of time came to be extended to include a wider geographical area. Martin Noth holds that:

the Israelites extended the name to include all of the pre-Israelite inhabitants of the land living in their environs, and finally came to call their entire home-land, or at least Cisjordan, the land of Canaan.<sup>4</sup>

The inhabitants of the land. It is not certain who

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<sup>3</sup>Ibid., pp. 11,12.

<sup>4</sup>Martin Noth, The Old Testament World (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1966), p. 53.

the original inhabitants of the land were. The history of the "Canaanites" is very complex. According to Genesis 9 and 10, Canaan was the son of Ham, and his descendents came to be called the "Canaanites."<sup>5</sup> These included such people as the Jebusites, the Amorites and Hivites. Meek points out that the history of the Canaanites goes back to at least 3000 B. C. and that they came under the suzerainty of the Twelfth Dynasty of Egypt about 2000 B. C. He also says that subsequent to this time there was a great influx of many races of nomadic people such as the Hittites, the Horites and the Amorites, into the land, resulting in an amalgamation of many peoples.<sup>6</sup> Steven Barabas has a slightly different view about their history: "The Canaanites were of Semitic stock, and were part of a larger migration of Semites (Phoenicians, Amorites, Canaanites) from NE Arabia in the third millennium B. C."<sup>7</sup> Kathleen Kenyon, a leading archaeologist of our times, believes that a racial amalgamation took place somewhere in Syria, and out of it emerged the Canaanite culture.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>5</sup>Genesis 9:18,22.

<sup>6</sup>T. J. Meek, "Canaanites," Dictionary of the Bible (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1963), p. 120.

<sup>7</sup>Steven Barabas, "Canaan, Canaanites," The Zondervan Pictorial Bible Dictionary (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, 1963), p. 143.

<sup>8</sup>Kathleen Kenyon, Amorites and Canaanites (London: The Oxford University Press, 1966), p. 76.

The civilization of the Canaanites. Whatever might be the theories of the origin of the Canaanites, the fact remains that they were a highly civilized people. Archaeological excavations done at many cities like Jericho, Lachish, Megiddo and Biblos prove that the Canaanites possessed a highly developed culture and civilization. Miss Kenyon says, "The great advance in civilization is shown by all sites excavated. Once more, an urban civilization with closely built-up towns surrounded by imposing defences is found."<sup>9</sup> Albright in an excellent article points out that the Canaanites played a unique role in the history of ancient civilization. He mentions that one of their most important contributions to the world in general and to the Israelites in particular was the art of writing.<sup>10</sup> It is generally agreed that the Hebrews adopted the Canaanite language after they had settled down in Palestine. In addition, the Israelites received from the Canaanites such things as ceramic arts, music and musical instruments and architecture. The Old Testament also bears witness to the fact that the twelve Israelites who were sent to the land of Canaan to observe the land and its inhabitants came back with the report that

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<sup>9</sup>Ibid., p. 62.

<sup>10</sup>W. F. Albright, "The Role of the Canaanites in the History of Civilization," The Bible and the Ancient Near East. G. E. Wright (ed.) (New York: Doubleday and Company, 1961), pp. 328-362.

the Canaanites were a strong people and that they dwelt in big "walled cities."<sup>11</sup>

The Canaanite religion. As for the religion of Canaan, the Old Testament gives only a very vague picture. which comes mainly from the prohibitions that God gave to the Israelites with reference to some rites of the Canaanites. "To go a whoring after" other gods is the usual Old Testament way of referring to participation in the rites for the Canaanite god Baal. The other gods mentioned occasionally are: the goddess Ashteroth, whose temple was at Beth-Shan; Chemosh, the god of the Transjordan Moabites, for whom Solomon erected a high place; Molech, the god to whom child sacrifice was made; and Dagon, the Philistine god of Ashdod. More frequently the Canaanite pantheon is referred to by the anonymous "other gods."<sup>12</sup>

There are also some references in the Old Testament from which a vague picture can be reconstructed of the worship of Canaan. Their worship included such ingredients as the "high places," equipped with altars, standing pillars, images of Asherah, and idols. The idols were of two kinds, molten images and graven images. The cultic officials of the Canaanite religion are described in the Old Testament

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<sup>11</sup>Numbers 13:28.

<sup>12</sup>Exodus 20:3; 34:17; Deuteronomy 5:7; 8:19; 18:20.

under the titles gedheshim or gedheshoth.<sup>13</sup> These Hebrew words have been variously translated in the RSV as "Sodomite," "temple prostitute," "cult prostitute," and "whore."<sup>14</sup> James B. Pritchard makes this observation about the biblical references to the Canaanite religion:

These tantalizing references label, rather than describe, the objects and the personnel of the cult of Canaan. Yet the frequency with which these labels occur on the pages of the Old Testament makes it clear that the contest between Yahweh, the God of Israel, and Baal was a real and a long struggle.<sup>15</sup>

The Old Testament picture of the Canaanites and their religion has been enlarged and made clearer by extensive archaeological activities carried out in the northern part of Canaan since 1860. The pioneers in this field were the French archaeologists, among whom the name of Ernest Renan deserves special mention. These excavations were followed by the epochmaking discovery of ancient Ugarit in 1929. The thousands of clay tablets recovered from this site have been studied by eminent scholars including such men as W. F. Albright and C. H. Gordon. These documents, which Pritchard calls the "Canaanite Bible," consist of mytho-poetic literature and enable scholars to see the religion of

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<sup>13</sup>Noth, The Old Testament World, p. 281.

<sup>14</sup>II Kings 23:7; Hosea 4:14; I Kings 14:24; 15:2, 12.

<sup>15</sup>James B. Pritchard, Archaeology and the Old Testament (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1958), p. 92.

the Canaanites in a brighter light.<sup>16</sup>

The religion of the Canaanites, judging from the myths of Ras Shamra concerning the vicissitudes of Baal, the storm god, was "largely directed to predisposing Providence in Nature."<sup>17</sup> Baal, the king of the gods, who is also called "Aliyn Baal," the "Prince" and "Lord of Earth," is seen engaged in a conflict with Mot (death), who kills him. Baal, however, is brought back to life through the efforts of his sister Anat, who also takes vengeance on Mot. Baal's victory marked the changing of the season with its new crop. From the Baal and the Anat myths, it is apparent that the Canaanite religion was centered around the concept of fertility. It can also be observed that there was a close connection between myth and ritual.<sup>18</sup>

The other deities in the Canaanite pantheon included such deities as El, who was "the father of men and gods," and the three goddesses, Astarte, Anath, and Asherah. Though El is described as the creator of all, he occupies only an insignificant place in the mythological literature. The figure of Baal dominates the Canaanite pantheon with the

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<sup>16</sup>Ibid., p. 110.

<sup>17</sup>John Gray, Archaeology and the Old Testament World (London: Thomas Nelson and Sons, Ltd., 1962), p. 106.

<sup>18</sup>Ibid., p. 112.



female gods appearing as mother-goddesses and divine courtesans. They are also goddesses of fertility whose sexual promiscuity is well attested by the mythological texts. Finally, they were also goddesses of war.<sup>19</sup>

Another feature of the Canaanite religion was the practice of sacred prostitution associated with the fertility cult. Both gods and human beings are seen participating in this ritual. That the Canaanites practiced sacred prostitution is also apparent from such passages:

There shall be no whore of the daughters of Israel, nor a Sodomite of the sons of Israel. Thou shalt not bring the hire of a whore, or the price of a dog, into the house of the Lord thy God for any vow: for even both these are abomination unto the Lord thy God.<sup>20</sup>

They sacrifice upon the tops of the mountains, and burn incense upon the hills, under oaks and poplars and elms, because the shadow thereof is good: therefore your daughters shall commit whoredom...and they sacrifice with harlots.<sup>21</sup>

In the light of both Scripture and the archaeological findings, one can be reasonably sure that the religion of the Canaanites was a natural religion which deified the forces of nature, and that all the myths and rituals centered around the fertility cult.

<sup>19</sup>Albright, Archaeology and the Religion of Israel (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1942), pp. 74, 75.

<sup>20</sup>Deuteronomy 23:17, 18 (KJV).

<sup>21</sup>Hosea 4:13, 14 (KJV).

## II. THE CANAANITES AND THE ISRAELITES

Theories of the conquest. There are divergent and conflicting views concerning the entry of the Israelites into the land of Canaan and the outcome of the contact between these two peoples. G. Mendenhall points out that there are two different views about the conquest of the land of the Canaanites.<sup>22</sup>

The first is the biblical view which maintains that the Israelites entered the land under the leadership of Joshua and conquered it gradually by exterminating the inhabitants and destroying their cities, as commanded by God. This view holds that while the Israelites destroyed many cities like Jericho and Ai, the extermination was in no sense complete; therefore, the Canaanites who could not be conquered by the Hebrews stayed in the land side by side with the Israelites. For some time they stayed apart, but gradually they exerted their influence on the Israelites to such an extent that they began to adopt many Canaanite customs and practices. That the Israelites were tempted to adopt the Canaanite gods and their worship is evident from the account of the confrontation of the prophet Elijah with the prophets of Baal.<sup>23</sup> However, the biblical account does reveal that a

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<sup>22</sup>G. Mendenhall, "The Hebrew Conquest of Palestine," The Biblical Archaeologist, XXV (September, 1962), 67.

<sup>23</sup>I Kings 12:28-32; 18:1-46.

minority of the people remained faithful to Yahweh.

The second view of the conquest is that the Israelites entered the land as "infiltrators" and that they were overpowered by the Canaanites. The cities and towns which were said to have been destroyed by the Israelites had nothing to do with the Israelites, but were destroyed several centuries before by a nomadic race of people, who were later fused into the Canaanite population. Out of this fusion emerged a culture which was distinctively Canaanite. Kenyon, who favors this view, makes this comment:

This culture the infiltrating Israelites found, and archaeology is clear that they adopted it; it was the cohesive power of their religion that caused them eventually to emerge from it as an entity that has contributed so much to humanity.<sup>24</sup>

The nature of the Canaanite influence. The nature of the influence that the Canaanites had on the Israelites is described in different ways by biblical scholars. S. H. Hooke believes that the Israelites were completely dominated by the culture pattern of the Canaanites, but that with the rise of the great prophetic movement in the eighth century B. C. the Hebrew religion began to break away from the influence of the Canaanite culture and began to shape its own distinctive contribution to the history of religion.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>24</sup>Kenyon, Amorites and Canaanites, p. 77.

<sup>25</sup>Hooke, The Origins of Early Semitic Ritual, p. 9.

Pedersen holds that the Israelites at first assimilated the spirit and customs of the Canaanites and partly reacted against them, but gradually they adopted more and more of the Canaanite ideals. Under the Davidic kingdom the Canaanites were merged into the Israelitic unity and thus disappeared, but infused Canaanite life and culture into Israel. While the Canaanites as a racial entity disappeared, they left their marks on the Israelites, making them more Canaanitic. The Canaanite contribution to the Israelites is clearly seen in such matters as urban civilization and legal customs. The prophets of Israel, however, denounced the social and cultic trend of Canaanization.<sup>26</sup>

The impact of the Canaanite religion. As regards the impact of the Canaanite religion upon the religion of Israel, scholars like T. H. Robinson, Roland de Vaux, H. W. Robinson, O. Eissfeldt, and several others are of the opinion that a great many Canaanite beliefs and practices found their way into the religion of the Hebrews. These include the adoption of cultic centers, agricultural festivals, sacrificial system, priesthood, and worship of Canaanite deities.

It is also suggested that the Hebrew God Jehovah was

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<sup>26</sup> Johs Pedersen, Israel-Its Life and Culture, I-II (London: Oxford University Press, 1926), pp. 21-25.

assimilated into the Canaanite Baal.<sup>27</sup> R. A. Rosenberg in an article entitled "Yahweh Becomes King," argues that Yahweh, who was the tribal god of the Israelites, accompanied them and upon their settlement in Canaan absorbed into his person the attributes of the Canaanite deities and became recognized as the god of Canaan. He gradually extended the sphere of influence and became a universal god.<sup>28</sup>

The general trend in modern scholarship is to hold that while the Israelites did borrow many things from the Canaanites, they "transformed" the borrowed elements into "something new, something that strikes us as being specially Israelite."<sup>29</sup> But how they were able to bring about this transformation is not satisfactorily explained by the modern scholars.

Conclusions. From this study of the Canaanites and their encounter with the Hebrews, the writer gathers that the Canaanites were a highly civilized people and that they had contributed a great deal to the material culture of the world at large. Their religion, however, was a naturalistic and polytheistic religion which was regarded as detrimental to the religion of the people of Israel.

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<sup>27</sup>T. H. Robinson, A History of Israel, I (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1932), p. 149.

<sup>28</sup>R. A. Rosenberg, "Yahweh Becomes King," Journal of Biblical Literature, LXXXV (September, 1966), 297-307.

<sup>29</sup>H. Ringgren, Israelite Religion (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1966), p. 58.

## CHAPTER III

### THE CANAANITE PRIESTHOOD IN UGARITIC LITERATURE

The preceding chapter pointed out that several critical scholars are of the opinion that the Israelites, upon their entry into the land, were dominated by Canaanite culture and that in the course of time, they adopted from the Canaanites many aspects of their civilization, including their religion. Among other things, they "borrowed" from the Canaanites such things as cultic shrines, cultic officials and cultic rituals. The attempt in this chapter is to find the nature and function of the Canaanite priesthood as revealed in the Ugaritic literature, in order to detect the cultic affinities between the two religions, if any. The study involves such aspects as the cult, the cultic officials, the priestly families of Ugarit and the functions of the Canaanite priest and is based on an inductive examination of the Ugaritic literature.

#### I. THE CULT

That Ugarit had an independently developed cult is well attested by the Ras Shamra documents and other archaeological discoveries.<sup>1</sup> The religion of the people was

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<sup>1</sup>Flemming Hvidberg, Weeping and Laughter in the Old Testament: A Study of Canaanite-Israelite Religion (Leiden, Holland: E. J. Brill, 1962), p. 19.

organized around the fertility cult in which myth and ritual played a major role, and was a very influential factor in the life of the ancient Canaanites. Every aspect of life was dominated by religious factors. Prosperity and well-being depended upon the correct performance of the rites.

One of the most important festivals among the Canaanites was the autumn festival, during which time the history of the whole year was set forth. This festival, which was also the new year's festival, was the center of sacredness. Many ritualistic performances were needed at the celebration of this festival, including many things such as eating, drinking, weeping, sacrifices, the wedding of the gods, and the ritual of sacred prostitution.<sup>2</sup> Martin Noth observes that

sacred sexual intercourse was a prominent part of these rites, in which the divine propagation of life was portrayed. It was consummated by priests and priestesses as well as by special "devoted" persons at the sanctuaries...<sup>3</sup>

The festival was climaxed by Baal's taking his seat on the throne as king.

## II. CULTIC OFFICIALS

The Ugaritic texts give evidence to the fact that associated with the cult were cultic officials. It should be noted here that the office of the priesthood in ancient Canaan

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<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 54.

<sup>3</sup>Noth, The Old Testament World, p. 281.

was a developing institution. The exact origin of the Canaanite priesthood is uncertain, but judging from the nature of their primitive religion one might infer that certain persons were thought to be better qualified than others to perform the rites at the cultic shrines. Hooke says that "the priest becomes the individual who possesses the requisite knowledge for the correct performing of the ritual."<sup>4</sup> The identity of these cultic officials will be examined in the following passages.

The king. The king figures largely in connection with the cultic rituals in the Ras Shamra texts. The Keret and Aqhat texts enable one to reconstruct the role of the king in the community.<sup>5</sup> John Gray points out that the ideology of kingship in ancient Canaan involves two basic concepts: (1) Kingship is hereditary, whereby the stability of the royal line is maintained, (2) the king is not merely a ruler who maintains law and order, but he is the chosen representative of the people before their deities. Gray states, "As the embodiment of the community the king represents the people before God. He does so pre-eminently in the capacity of

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<sup>4</sup>Hooke, The Origins of Early Semitic Ritual, p. 64.

<sup>5</sup>The pointing of the Ugaritic names (Keret, Aqhat and Daniel) in this thesis follows the pattern of Ancient Near Eastern Texts, edited by James B. Pritchard. All the other Ugaritic words, however, are given without pointing and follow the pattern of Ugaritic Textbook by C. H. Gordon.



priest."<sup>6</sup>

Gray also points out that the Canaanite king is sometimes described as the "son of God." This title denotes a sacramental relationship rather than a natural relationship. By virtue of this sacramental relationship, the king is able to represent his people before the gods and mediates to them the divine influence. Gray observes, however, that

there is a polarity in this sacramental relationship; now the emphasis falls on the status of the king as the representative of the god, now it falls on his identity with his people.<sup>7</sup>

This sacramental relationship and the priestly function of the king is illustrated in the texts of Keret and Aqhat. In these texts the priestly functions are discharged only by the kings. Both of these Canaanite kings, Keret and Daniel, are depicted as receiving revelations from the gods and bringing sacrifices to them. In the Keret text the king is depicted as bringing the sacrifice:

He enters into the shade of a tent  
He takes a lamb of sacrifice in his hands  
A kid in both hands  
Loaves of his bread which---  
He takes the entrails of a bird of sacrifice  
He pours wine into a cup of silver  
Honey into a cup of gold  
And he goes up to the top of the tower  
He rides the shoulders of the wall

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<sup>6</sup>John Gray, "Canaanite Kingship in Theory and Practice," Vetus Testamentum, II (July, 1952), 203.

<sup>7</sup>John Gray, The Legacy of Canaan (Leiden, Holland: E. J. Brill, 1965), p. 210.

He lifts his hands unto heaven  
He sacrifices to Tor, his father, Il.<sup>8</sup>

Similarly King Daniel, while seeking for the divine gift of a son, performs the rite of incubation (the technique by which the will of the gods is revealed through dreams) in the temple of Baal, and makes offerings to the gods.

The gods will eat the offerings  
The deities (will drink the offerings).<sup>9</sup>

These two texts also show that the said kings received divine revelation from the gods, Keret from Il and Daniel from Baal.<sup>10</sup>

The main fact that emerges from these two texts is that the king had concentrated in his person the offices of the priest and prophet. The king definitely had a mediatorial function by which the gods and the human beings were able to communicate to each other. Gray points out that in the examples cited above the kings were making offerings and seeking divine revelation for their personal benefits, but their actions affect the whole community because of their mediatorial function.<sup>11</sup> B. Vawter says that since the texts

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<sup>8</sup>C. H. Gordon, Ugaritic Literature (Roma: Pontificium Biblicum, 1949), p. 71 (Keret: 159-169).

<sup>9</sup>Ibid., p. 85 (2Aqhat 1:3).

<sup>10</sup>Ibid., p. 68, (Keret 35f.); p. 86 (2Aqhat 1:15f.).

<sup>11</sup>Gray, The Legacy of Canaan, p. 210.

do not assign such a role to any other persons, one might conclude that the king had a prominent role in the sacrificial matters.<sup>12</sup>

Khnm. One of the cultic functionaries of the Ugaritic religion, in addition to the kings, is the khnm, the ancient Semitic title for priests. W. E. Addis suggests that kahin, which is the Arabic form of this word, might mean "One who as the organ of a jinn or spirit gave oracles, chiefly, perhaps at a sanctuary."<sup>13</sup> He points out further that gradually the Arabic kahin lost his connection with the sanctuary and became a mere sorcerer.

In other ancient religions khnm had the duty and privilege of offering sacrifice, but there is no passage in the Ras Shamra texts which connect them with the sacrifice. Vawter makes the observation that the religious texts which often treat of sacrifice are altogether silent about the khnm.<sup>14</sup> It is in the administrative texts that they are closely connected with the nqdm and the qds in 113:71-73 and also in the text that lists various professions. This may be an indication that they were a closed group, but as for their

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<sup>12</sup>B. Vawter, "The Canaanite Background of Genesis 49," The Catholic Biblical Quarterly, XVII (January, 1955), p. 88.

<sup>13</sup>W. E. Addis, Hebrew Religion to the Establishment of Judaism under Ezra (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1906), p. 48.

<sup>14</sup>Vawter, op. cit., p. 89.

function at Ugarit, little is known. Scholars like Meek disagree and argue that in the Ugaritic literature a khn is the cultic official in the sanctuary in a general sense.

Kraus also observes:

The Charismatic gift of "prophecy" and of "seeing," which is so predominant in the Arabic use, was apparently only one of the many functions of the priest -but probably the most significant when we remember that the delivery of the oracle was one of the main features of the <sup>15</sup>sacral activity of the Old Testament כֹּהֵן as well.

Nqdm. Along with the khnm, another group of cultic personnel is mentioned, viz. the nqdm. While nqdm appears once or twice in the text without any connection with the khnm, they were often associated with khnm and qdsn. This association of khnm and nqdm has led some (e.g. Dhorme) to think that this office was a vestige of a nomadic priesthood. T. H. Gaster is of the opinion that it might refer to the "sacred sheep of the temple."<sup>16</sup>

Gray suggests that nqd may be cognate with the Akkadian word naqidu, which means

one skilled in divining by the liver of a sacrificial victim, this practice being attested by clay models of livers divided and charted for the instruction of aspiring augurers, which have been found at various archaeological sites in Palestine and Syria.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>15</sup>Kraus, Worship in Israel, p. 95.

<sup>16</sup>Vawter, op. cit., p. 89.

<sup>17</sup>Gray, Archaeology and the Old Testament World, p. 115.

Atn-prln, in the administrative texts, is referred to as rb khnm and rb nqdm. This association between khnm and nqdm might be an indication that they were some kind of cultic officials ranking next to the khnm. The texts do not permit one to make any more speculation as to their nature and function.

Qdsm. Another title that appears in connection with the cult is the word qdsm. This word occurs five times in the administrative texts (63:3; 81:2; 82:2; 113:73) in connection with khnm and once quite isolated (114:1). Vawter says that the etymology of the word and its association with khnm point to some office in the cult. That they were sacred prostitutes is not supported by the texts. Noth thinks they are identical with the qedheshim referred to in the Old Testament.<sup>18</sup> Gray regards them as "consecrated persons" and says that they may have been the equivalents of the Hebrew sacred prostitutes (qedeshim and qedeshoth).<sup>19</sup> Addis thinks that the immoral practice carried out by the "holy men" and "holy women" in the temple of Jerusalem and elsewhere<sup>20</sup> corresponds to the cultic prostitution of the ancient

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<sup>18</sup>Noth, The Old Testament World, p. 281.

<sup>19</sup>Gray, Archaeology and the Old Testament World, p. 115.

<sup>20</sup>II Kings 23:7; Hosea 4:14; I Kings 14:24; 15:2,12; 22:46.

Canaanites and reveals their syncretistic influence on Israel.<sup>21</sup>

Vawter disagrees with the theory that the qds were sacred prostitutes on the grounds that the texts do not authorize one to speak anything definitely about their function, other than that they had some role in the cult. To say anything more than this would be a matter of pure conjecture.<sup>22</sup>

There are also some other titles in the Ras Shamra documents, which are said to have been associated with the cult. These include such titles as klb, ins ilm, blt bhtm, srn and kmr. These words have been variously interpreted by different scholars, so as to assign them to different duties and functions in the cult. Some women also appear in the texts in connection with the death of Aqhat. While some associate these women with the cult, the texts show that they were only professional mourners.<sup>23</sup>

A study of the cultic personnel shows that while several persons are mentioned in the Ugaritic literature, their exact nature and function are not revealed in the texts.

### III. THE PRIESTLY FAMILIES OF UGARIT

The administrative texts of the Ugaritic literature

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<sup>21</sup>Addis, Hebrew Religion, p. 93.

<sup>22</sup>Vawter, op. cit., p. 90.

<sup>23</sup>Ibid., p. 91.

give some information about the type of society ancient Ugarit had. There existed in Ugarit a class system based on occupational differences.<sup>24</sup> The administrative texts, which consist mainly of names, group men according to occupations or guilds, which tended to be hereditary. These guilds included such classes or castes as warriors, priests, craftsmen and scribes.<sup>25</sup> One is reminded of the caste system which has existed in India since the invasion of the Aryans from central Asia.

The king, of course, was the head of the state and was honored with religious devotion. The priestly functions of the king have been already mentioned. By virtue of the civic and religious authority of the king, members of the king's clan enjoyed a higher status in society. Gordon states:

Members of the king's clan and of other important clans were strategically placed in office, particularly in the priesthood where they could exercise control, to the advantage of the established regime, in a society that cherished religion and accepted theocratic principles.<sup>26</sup>

The Keret epic shows that King Keret belonged to the clan T. While the king's clan was rated high among other clans, evidently some priestly families at Ugarit enjoyed high privileges. Gray says that twelve priestly families

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<sup>24</sup>Gordon, Ugaritic Literature, p. 124.

<sup>25</sup>Ibid..

<sup>26</sup>Ibid., p. 122.

are listed in the Ugaritic texts, including the family of T . He points out, however, that in the Keret text the employment of T may be taken as an epithet of the king, which could be translated as "the generous."<sup>27</sup>

The mention of these priestly families indicates that there was in Ugarit a cultic establishment and that there was a departmentalization of office by which certain cultic functions were assigned to certain priestly families.<sup>28</sup> It is also clear that some of these priestly families were given free use of the land and that some of them drew ten shekels of silver each as their pay, which put them among the better paid men of that day.

The social status of the cultic officials examined above (ngdm, gdsm, kmr, srn) is not certain, but in view of the fact that the priestly families are listed separately, it is possible to infer that each one enjoyed a different status. The mention of Atn Prnl as high priest is also an indication that there existed a priestly hierarchy in Ugarit, whose details cannot be gathered from the Ras Shamra texts.<sup>29</sup>

#### IV. THE FUNCTIONS OF THE PRIEST

The office of priesthood in ancient Canaan was a very

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<sup>27</sup>Gray, The Legacy of Canaan, p. 215.

<sup>28</sup>Ibid., p. 212.

<sup>29</sup>Ibid., p. 216.



important one, primarily for two reasons. First, there was a close connection between kingship and priesthood. It has already been observed that the king was regarded as the medium between the people and the deities. Secondly, in the Canaanite society, religion played a major role in every aspect of the daily life of the people. Its influence, says Orlinsky, "extended widely into the economic, political and social spheres."<sup>30</sup> In view of these factors, the importance of the priestly functions cannot be overlooked. The priest had many duties which could not be discharged by ordinary men.

Mediation. The first and foremost function of the Canaanite priest was that of mediation. It has already been noticed that the king, by virtue of his sacramental relationship, was able to act as medium between the deities and the worshippers. That is to say, the king was also a prophet and a priest. He was a priest in that he represented the people before the deities. He was a prophet in that he represented the gods before the people. As a prophet, the king's duty was to discern the will of the gods and make them known to the people. This duty was often carried out through the rite of incubation in which the divine will was revealed in dreams.<sup>31</sup> As the priest, the task of the king

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<sup>30</sup>Orlinsky, Ancient Israel, p. 54.

<sup>31</sup>T. H. Gaster, Thepsis (Garden City, New York: Doubleday and Company, Inc., 1961), p. 331.

was to bring the worshipper to the deities through ritual performances.

In other religions, the work of mediation is accomplished through oracles and sacrificial rites. In the Canaanite religion, however, there is nothing that clearly states that the mediatorial functions were discharged by the use of sacrifices. From archaeological finds and other sources, scholars know that the Canaanites participated in sacrifices, including human victims, at times. Sabatino Moscati says that human sacrifices were offered "on the occasion of great public calamities, as man's supreme gift to the gods."<sup>32</sup> It is also believed that infant sacrifice was practiced by the Canaanites.

It had been alleged that the Hebrew sacrificial system was borrowed from the Canaanite system. Rowley represents modern critical scholarship when he states, "Modern discoveries and research have confirmed the belief that the Hebrew sacrificial system was largely of Canaanite origin."<sup>33</sup> This, he says, has been proved by the discovery of cuneiform texts at modern Ras Shamra. It is essential therefore that one look into the sacrificial system of the Canaanites as revealed

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<sup>32</sup>Sabatino Moscati, Ancient Semitic Civilization (London: Elek Books Ltd., 1957), p. 116.

<sup>33</sup>Rowley, The Meaning of Sacrifice, p. 79.

in the Ugaritic literature.

Dussaud asserts the Canaanite origin of the Israelite sacrificial system on the basis of the Punic sacrifice lists.<sup>34</sup> The Ras Shamra texts also, it is believed, give evidence to Canaanite influence upon the sacrificial system of the Israelites. The basis for this assertion is a similarity in terminology. Ringgren points out that there are four terms in the Ras Shamra texts which correspond to the Hebrew terms for sacrifice:

1. dbh- "sacrifice" corresponds to the Hebrew Zebah.
2. Slmm- "peace offering" corresponds to Selamim.
3. Srp- "burnt offering" has no etymological counterpart in Israel, but the same kind of sacrifice existed there.
4. Kll corresponds to Kalil, "whole (burnt) offering."<sup>35</sup>

On the basis of these similarities in terminology, Ringgren concludes that the Israelite sacrificial system originated from the Canaanites, but concedes that Israel made some changes in the system.

This view is not accepted by all scholars. Gaster holds that the "Hebrew zabah means properly 'the slaughtering of an animal' and does not necessarily denote a sacrifice."<sup>36</sup> Vawter in his attempt to find a connection between

<sup>34</sup>Ringgren, Israelite Religion, p. 167.

<sup>35</sup>Ibid., pp. 176-179.

<sup>36</sup>Gaster, Thepsis, p. 234.

the Hebrew and the Canaanite sacrificial systems, makes this remark:

There is no one word in these texts that can be singled out as a technical term denoting holocaust. Only srp can be considered seriously; however, it occurs but twice (1:4; 9:7) and in a context which gives no clue to the kind of sacrifice.<sup>37</sup>

It has been already pointed out that both King Keret and King Daniel made offerings to the gods, and that in both cases the kings were not acting on behalf of the people, but for their personal benefit. Keret's offerings included such items as a lamb, loaves, a bird, honey and wine.<sup>38</sup> In the case of Daniel the texts do not explicitly say what things were offered, but there was something for the gods to "eat" and to "drink."<sup>39</sup>

Attention has been called by some to the fact that King Daniel was clad in a ritual garb while passing the nights in the sacred precincts awaiting a divine revelation from the gods:

He proceeds to his loft (and) ascends  
And he lies down (clad in) a garb  
And spends the night.<sup>40</sup>

Gaster thinks that this garb uzr was a loincloth which

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<sup>37</sup>Vawter, "The Canaanite Background of Genesis 49," p. 91.

<sup>38</sup>Gordon, Ugaritic Literature, p. 71.

<sup>39</sup>Ibid., p. 85.

<sup>40</sup>Ibid., p. 86 (Aqhat 1:15-16).

the king also wore while he made offerings to the gods. He further points out that the ritual garb of a suppliant or pilgrim among the Semites was the loincloth and that analogous to it was the linen ephod worn by the priests and acolytes in the sanctuary.<sup>41</sup> It is difficult, however, to ascertain that the garb referred to in the Aqhat text was a priestly garb.

Maintenance of the status quo. Another important function of the priesthood is the maintenance of the status quo. Closely connected is the idea that the priest possessed peculiar gifts of healing and of conferring fertility.<sup>42</sup> In the Aqhat text, Daniel is seen as embracing and kissing the various plants to promote fertility.<sup>43</sup>

It has been already observed that the Canaanite cult was based on the concept of fertility. All the religious rites including the sacred prostitution were performed for the perpetuation of fertility-in men, animals and plants. Although it is not known precisely what rites were performed, it is only logical to think that the priest was looked upon as the only qualified person to perform the cultic rituals in order to ensure health and happiness.

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<sup>41</sup>Gaster, Thepsis, p. 330.

<sup>42</sup>Gray, The Legacy of Canaan, p. 210.

<sup>43</sup>Charles F. Pfeiffer, Ras Shamra and the Bible (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book House, 1962), p. 38.

Military functions. Still another function of the priest, according to the Ras Shamra documents, is his role in war. Gordon points out that the administrative texts show that some members of the priesthood were connected with the army. Judging from the theocratic nature of the Ugaritic society, one might assume that the priest had an important role, perhaps that of authorizing or forbidding military decisions. To quote Gordon, "their function was accordingly often one of command, which is not the case with modern chaplains."<sup>44</sup>

Gordon further points out that in the Mari tablets two baru priests are the only mentioned officers of two units of three hundred men each. It is likely, he says, that certain priests were assigned to some regular duties in the army in order to avoid disasters, which would be the case if the priests who had to make important military decisions should be inexperienced in military affairs.<sup>45</sup>

Custodian of traditions. Another significant function of the Ugaritic priesthood was that of safeguarding tradition and authority. Gray points out that the high priest Atn Prnl was an authority for the version of the Baal myth. The priest was regarded as the custodian of literary tradition. Both

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<sup>44</sup>Gordon, Ugaritic Literature, p. 125.

<sup>45</sup>Ibid.

the oral and the written tradition were kept alive by the efforts of the priest, possibly through the process of teaching and recording. Gray also says that Atn Prnl taught the particular version of the Baal myth which was inscribed by El-mlk.<sup>46</sup> Judging from the study of the oriental religions, one might infer that, as in other religions, the Canaanite priest had a distinctive role with regard to the recording, teaching and interpreting of the sacred myths. The priest may have been the sole author of the myths.

Conclusions. This study has led to the conclusion that the Canaanites had a cult with several cultic officials in charge of the functions at each shrine or cultic center. While the distinctive role of the cultic officials is not stated clearly, one might think that each one had some specific function. In the Ras Shamra literature the king excels all the other cultic personnel. It may be correct to assume that in the Ras Shamra literature the office of the priesthood was not static, but a developing institution.

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<sup>46</sup>Gray, The Legacy of Canaan, p. 216.

## CHAPTER IV

### THE HEBREW PRIESTHOOD

Having examined the nature and function of the Canaanite priesthood, this study will look into the question of the priesthood of Israel. The concern in this chapter is with such aspects as the origin, nature and functions of the Hebrew priesthood. The study is based mainly on an inductive study of Scripture.

#### I. THEORIES OF ORIGIN

Several theories are advanced by different scholars regarding the origin of the Hebrew priesthood. It is not possible to examine the view represented by each scholar (nor is it within the scope of this paper), but it will suffice to examine briefly a few representative views held by some prominent scholars.

Canaanite origin. Attention has been called, in different contexts, to the fact that many critical scholars who apply the law of progress and development even to the sphere of religion, hold that the Israelites took over from the Canaanites not only the material culture but also their religion. T. H. Robinson thinks that the reason for the adoption of the Canaanite religion by the Israelites was that they were afraid to offend the local deities.<sup>1</sup> Budd goes even further

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<sup>1</sup>T. H. Robinson, A History of Israel, p. 167.



and says that the Israelites worshipped Baal because they believed that without such worship the land would not yield any fruit.<sup>2</sup>

These scholars who maintain that the Israelites took over the religious views and practices of the Canaanites en bloc, hold that cultic centers and cultic officials of the Canaanite religion were also taken over by the Hebrews. Orlinsky makes this statement concerning the Israelite adoption of the Canaanite priesthood. "Local shrines with individual priestly families and seers in charge, sprang up everywhere."<sup>3</sup> The same author says also that "Indeed, the Canaanite civilization was so advanced that it nearly absorbed the desert invaders."<sup>4</sup> Many scholars find the religion of Israel deeply rooted in the soil of Canaanite culture and civilization.

Meek's view. Meek's theory of the origin of the Hebrew priesthood is presented in the book Hebrew Origins.<sup>5</sup> His view may be summarized as follows:

The origin of the Hebrew priesthood can be traced back to the earliest stage of social evolution and is found very close to the beginning of magical and

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<sup>2</sup>Budd, Religion of Israel to the Exile, p. 56.

<sup>3</sup>Orlinsky, Ancient Israel, p. 56.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., p. 52.

<sup>5</sup>Meek, Hebrew Origins, p. 119f.

religious practices. There was a time when each individual invoked the god for himself without the help of any mediators. Gradually there developed the idea that certain people have immediate access to the spirit world more easily than others and such men became the first priests in religion. They were Shamans, wonder workers, medicine men who had special spiritual power, or those living close to sacred places. With the elaboration of magical practices and ritual observances, the need arose for specialists in these matters. This marked the beginning of professional priesthood. In the course of time they organized themselves into priesthoods. While they officiated in important religious functions, the ordinary ceremonies were performed by the head of the family or the elders.

In contrast to the origin of the professional and popular priesthood, the origin and development of the state priesthood is connected with the development of the political organization from the tribal system to the city states ruled by the king. The head of the tribe was regarded as having special mana or spiritual power and naturally he became the chief priest. Later this office was transferred to the king who became the chief priest of the state religion. However, when the responsibilities of the king grew he was forced to delegate his work to deputies who became the professional state priests. They grew and organized themselves into priesthoods and their office became more or less hereditary. The popular priesthood and the state priesthood came into conflict with each other but the state priesthood by virtue of its wealth and influence was able to absorb the former. Those who lost their prestige, in their struggle to gain political power, tried to compensate it by devoting themselves completely to religion (as the magi of Persia). This seems to be the way the priesthood developed with most peoples and we might as well believe that this is the way the Levitical priesthood originated.<sup>6</sup>

Wellhausen's view. Julius Wellhausen, the proponent of the critical school, in his attempt to reconstruct the history and religion of Israel on the basic assumptions of evolution and development, also sought to reconstruct the

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<sup>6</sup>Ibid., pp. 119-121.

priesthood of Israel so as to fit the biblical material to his evolutionary mold. Wellhausen's view is stated in his Prolegomena to the History of Israel, in which he devotes two chapters to this subject.<sup>7</sup>

According to Wellhausen, priesthood in Israel was a developing institution. He holds that in the earliest period in the history of Israel no distinction existed between the clergy and the laity. Everyone had a right to slaughter an animal for sacrifice. Professional priests were confined to great sanctuaries. He goes on to say:

Any one may slaughter and offer sacrifice (I Sam. 14:34) and, even in cases where priests are present, there is not a single trace of a systematic setting apart of what is holy, or of shrinking from touching it.<sup>8</sup>

He believes that the distinction between the Levites and priests represented in the book of Ezekiel is a key factor in understanding the development of the priestly hierarchy. To him, the Aaronic priesthood mentioned in Leviticus is a fiction, which the priestly writer inserted in the document to maintain unity of worship on the part of the Israelites. It was during the post exilic period that the fully developed hierarchy, with the high priest at the

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<sup>7</sup>Julius Wellhausen, Prolegomena to the History of Israel, Trans. J. Sutherland Black and Allan Menzies (Edinburgh: Adam and Charles Black), p. 121f.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid., p. 131.

head of the structure, came into power.<sup>9</sup>

It is obvious that Wellhausen's reconstruction is based on his evolutionary approach to religion. His documentary hypothesis is a convenient attempt to explain the phenomenon of "growth."

Kaufmann's view. Yehezkel Kaufmann, the notable Jewish scholar, opposes Wellhausen's theory of the priesthood and its development. He finds the roots of the Aaronic priesthood in the ancient pagan priesthood of Israel. Being influenced by the message of Moses, the priests supported him and influenced the people to follow him.<sup>10</sup> He finds no hereditary connection between the Aaronites and the Levites. The Levites were originally a secular, warrior tribe, but the "golden calf episode" transformed them into militant champions of the new faith. Since the Aaronic priesthood was "too venerable to be set aside" the Levites shared with them the sacred service. While the service at the altar was the exclusive right of the Aaronites, the Levites were in charge of the ark and performed other menial work in the temple. While every Levite was entitled to the priesthood, not every one became a priest. Many of them remained as farmers and herdsmen. In the course of time there developed "an amalgam of

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<sup>9</sup>R. Abba, "Priests and Levites," The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible, III (New York: Abingdon Press, 1962), p. 885.

<sup>10</sup>Yehezkel Kaufmann, The Religion of Israel (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1960), pp. 196-197.

Aaronite and Levite priests, all of whom, of course, traced back their ancestry to Aaron."<sup>11</sup> With the completion of the building of the sanctuary, the Levites disappeared from the scene but they reappeared during the exile as the Zadokites, as seen in Ezekiel, to assume important priestly functions.<sup>12</sup>

The above cited views are only a few examples of what modern scholars think about the origin of the priesthood in Israel. These aforementioned scholars, along with several others like Rowley, T. H. Robinson and Kraus, have one thing in common, that is, they all subscribe to the notion of growth and development. While some differences can be observed among these scholars, they all agree that the highly developed system of the priesthood did not appear until the time of exile. Their presentation of the conception of the Hebrew priesthood constitutes one of the cornerstones of the documentary hypothesis.

## II. AN EXAMINATION OF THE TERMINOLOGY

There are different terms used to denote the office of the priesthood in the Old Testament. Whether they are identical or different this study will seek to discover.

Kohen. The Hebrew word for the priest is כֹּהֵן .

This word occurs over seven hundred times in the Old Testament

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<sup>11</sup>Ibid., p. 198.

<sup>12</sup>Ibid., p. 199.

either alone or qualified by the word "chief" or "high."<sup>13</sup>

In the Old Testament there are two words used for priest, כהן and כמרים. It is significant that the Old Testament uses only כהן to refer to the priests of Jehovah, although at times the word is used to refer to the priests of foreign gods such as Egyptian, Phoenician, Philistine, Moabite, or Ammonite. Kemarim, a noun derived from the root kmr-which was being used from about 2000 B. C. in the Assyrian colonies of Cappadocia-occurs only three times in the Bible and is always used for the priests of the false gods.<sup>14</sup>

The etymology of kohen is not certain, but several origins have been suggested. Vaux thinks that kohen may be related to the Akkadian verb kanu from the root k'n which in the shaphel means "to bend down, to do homage."<sup>15</sup> Alfred Halдар argues strongly that the kohanim of Israel were the counterparts of the Akkadian baru (seer) priests and that they practiced the same rites as the baru priests, viz. the observing of omens and practicing of divination.<sup>16</sup> Still

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<sup>13</sup>Abba, "Priests and Levites," p. 876.

<sup>14</sup>Vaux, Ancient Israel, p. 345.

<sup>15</sup>Ibid.

<sup>16</sup>Alfred Halдар, Association of Cult Prophets among the Ancient Semites (Uppsala: Almqvist and Wiksell's Boktryckeri, Ab. 1945), pp. 107, 108.

others think that kohen is derived from the Arabic kahin, meaning a "seer" or a "soothsayer." Abba is of the opinion that כֹּהֵן is a

specifically Canaanite term...The Hebrew noun כֹּהֵן is derived from the verb kahan, which appears to have the same meaning as kun (כָּן), "to stand." The priest is therefore one who stands before God as his servant or minister.<sup>17</sup>

The last view is the most commonly accepted one regarding the etymology of kohen. It is good to remember also what Moses spoke to the Israelites concerning the separation of the Levites to priesthood, "At that time the Lord separated the tribe of Levi, to bear the ark of the covenant of the Lord, to stand before the Lord to minister unto him and to bless in his name, unto this day."<sup>18</sup>

If this view is taken seriously, one must admit that the priest had a mediatorial function, that is, the priest represented the people before Jehovah. He also represented God in that he blessed the people in the name of God.

Levite. (לֵוִי) Another term which is connected with the priesthood is Levite. The identity of the Levites and their relationship to the family of Aaron are problems which have baffled many scholars. D. H. Hubbard makes this comment:

The relationship between the priests, who are the descendents of Aaron, and the Levites, the other members of Levi's tribe, is one of the thorny problems

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<sup>17</sup>Abba, "Priests and Levites," p. 877.

<sup>18</sup>Deuteronomy 10:8.

of the Old Testament religion.<sup>19</sup>

There are many and divergent views concerning the Levites and their role in the priesthood. The Hebrew term for Levite is לֵוִי and denotes a descendant of Levi. The word may be a gentilic. However, there are some who think that there is here a play upon words between לֵוִי and לָוִי which means "to attach" or "to be joined," that is, the tribe of Levi is to be joined to Aaron.<sup>20</sup> In this word play, some find the etymology of the term. It is argued on this basis that the word "Levite" does not signify genealogy, but rather signifies "one who attaches himself." According to this view, the Levites were originally foreigners who joined the Israelites during the Exodus, or "Hebrew cultic attendants who acted as an escort to the ark or were attached to some local sanctuary."<sup>21</sup> Others argue that the etymology of Levite is linked with the lawia, the south Arabian cultic officials who appear in the Minean inscriptions. Such would hold that the term Levite was originally a cultic term which the Israelites borrowed from the Mineans.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>19</sup>D. H. Hubbard, "Priests and Levites," The New Bible Dictionary (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1962), p. 1028.

<sup>20</sup>Ibid.

<sup>21</sup>Ibid.

<sup>22</sup>Ibid.



The question of the relationship of the Levites to the priests has been answered differently by scholars. Some regard the kohen and the Levite as identical, both terms designating the office of the priesthood. Others think that there is to be a clear distinction between the two, namely that the kohenim designated the priesthood proper and the Levites denote some priestly functions, but in subordination to the kohenim. There are still others who do not find any connection between the tribe of Levi and the priests (הלויים). They take לוי as an appellative to designate a profession. Kraus says, "there is plenty of evidence that the assumption that there was a connection between the tribe of Levi and the priests (הלויים) is based on insufficient evidence."<sup>23</sup>

Meek's theory is even more radical. The Levites, according to Meek, were originally a secular tribe. Their tribal god was the serpent god Nahash or Nehushtan. The connection between the Levite and the serpent cult is inferred from the probable connection between the name Levi and the dragon god "Leviathan," both being derived apparently from לוו meaning "to twist," "to coil," and לוי. The presence of the serpent names among the Levites points in the same direction. The secular tribe Levi in the course of time came to be invested with priestly functions. How

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<sup>23</sup>Kraus, Worship of Israel, p. 95.

this was achieved is not certain-"it is a matter veiled in deepest mystery"-perhaps through a bid for political power, as can be inferred from Genesis 34 and 49:5-7. Both Levi and Simeon were southern tribes. These two joined in a conspiracy against the southern confederacy, but were defeated in this attempt and were severely handled by Judah. The remnant was absorbed into Judah. The story of their union to the Yahweh cult is found in Exodus 32:25-29. The story of the young Levite belonging to the clan of Judah is indicative of their amalgamation. The Levites saved themselves from complete absorption by championing the cause of the stronger tribe, particularly their Yahweh cult. Later they renounced all earthly aspirations in order to become the priests of Jehovah. The early Levites were regarded as medium men or shamans by surrounding tribes. They became priests when the opportunity presented itself. This is the way Meek attempts to explain the origin of the Levite priesthood.<sup>24</sup>

### III. THE BIBLICAL DATA

The study now turns to examine the biblical data to see what the Bible has to say about the priesthood.

Origin of the Levitical priesthood. According to the biblical view, the institution of the Levitical priesthood

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<sup>24</sup>Meek, Hebrew Origins, pp. 121-129.

goes back to the period of wandering in the wilderness. Moses, a Levite, received instruction from Jehovah to consecrate Aaron, his brother, and the sons of Aaron to the office of the priesthood. In the ceremonies of consecration, which lasted for several days, Moses officiated and discharged the functions of a priest. When the installation was complete Aaron and his sons performed the sacrificial duties and thus became the first accredited priests in Israel. The priesthood was invested exclusively in Aaron and his descendants. The service at the altar was their special prerogative. All others were barred from this service and any violation of this law was punishable by death.<sup>25</sup>

There was, however, a clear distinction between Aaron and his sons. Aaron occupied a unique position as the anointed priest. It was Aaron who stayed the plague which broke out in the camp following the rebellion of Korah, by making atonement for the people and by standing "between the dead and the living." He had special priestly robes. At his death, these along with the office they symbolized were transferred to his son Eleazar. Thus from the beginning there was one who was "the high priest among his brethren." It is also evident that the death of the "high priest" (gadol kohen) marked

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<sup>25</sup>Exodus 28:1; 29:35,36; Leviticus 9; Exodus 28:1, 43; Numbers 3:10.

the end of an epoch.<sup>26</sup>

The Israelite priesthood, which was invested in Aaron and his descendants, can be rightly called the Levitical priesthood, since Aaron was by descent a Levite. All legitimate priests were Levites (though all Levites were not priests). It is significant that the writer of the Hebrews sanctions the sanctity of the Levitical priesthood and assigns the role of the high priest to Aaron.<sup>27</sup>

The Aaronites and the Levites. A distinction is also made between the descendants of Aaron and the remainder of the tribe of Levi. It was only after the consecration of Aaron and his sons to the priesthood that the remaining members of the tribe of Levi were separated as substitutes for the first-born to assist in the duties of the tabernacle. The reason for singling out the tribe of Levi for "the service of the tabernacle" is found partly in the golden calf story which discloses their zeal for Jehovah.<sup>28</sup> Hubbard says, "This display of fidelity to God may partially account for the signal responsibilities given the tribe in the Pentateuchal legislation."<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>26</sup>Exodus 29:7; Leviticus 4:3,5,16; 6:22; Numbers 34:25; 16:46-50; Exodus 28:4, 6-39; Leviticus 8:7-9; Numbers 20:25-28; Leviticus 21:10; Numbers 35:28.

<sup>27</sup>Hebrews 5:1-4; 7:11.

<sup>28</sup>Numbers 3:5ff.; 8:5-22; Exodus 32:25f.

<sup>29</sup>Hubbard, "Priests and Levites," p. 1028.

The duties of the Levites as ministers in the tabernacle are spelled out in the following passage:

And the Lord said unto Aaron, thou and thy sons and thy father's house with thee shall bear the iniquity of the sanctuary: and thou and thy sons with thee shall bear the iniquity of your priesthood. And thy brethern also of the tribe of Levi, the tribe of thy father, bring thou with thee, that they may be joined unto thee, and minister unto thee: but thou and thy sons with thee shall minister before the tabernacle of witness. And they shall keep thy charge, and the charge of all the tabernacle: only they shall not come nigh the vessels of the sanctuary and the altar, that neither they, nor ye also, die. And they shall be joined unto thee, and keep the charge of the tabernacle of the congregation, for all the service of the tabernacle: and a stranger shall not come nigh unto you. And ye shall keep the charge of the sanctuary, and the charge of the altar: that there be no wrath any more upon the children of Israel.<sup>30</sup>

This passage also makes a clear distinction between the Aaronites and the rest of the tribe of Levi. The Levites were divided into three groups according to the three sons of Levi: Gershon, Kohath, and Merari. Special duties were assigned to each of these groups.<sup>31</sup> The story of Korah's rebellion and the destruction of the rebels, followed by the sign of the sprouting rod, proved beyond all doubt that it was Aaron and his sons whom God chose to the office of the priesthood proper, and that the Levites had only an auxiliary ministry connected with the tabernacle.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>30</sup>Numbers 18:1-5 (KJV) (cf. Numbers 3:5ff.; 8:5-22).

<sup>31</sup>Numbers 3:14-38.

<sup>32</sup>Numbers 16:1-17:10; 18:1-7.

According to Scripture the history of the priesthood goes back to the wilderness period. It was instituted by Moses through the command of God. There is here a threefold hierarchy of high priest, priests and Levites. This hierarchy remains much the same throughout the rest of the Old Testament. The New Testament also makes the distinction between the priest and the Levite as seen in the parable of the good Samaritan told by the Lord.

The Zadokites. The appearance of the Zadokites as the only legitimate priests during the exile poses a problem. Who the Zadokites were and how they came into priestly office are matters debated by scholars.

There are some who connect the Zadokites with Melchizedek, who was the priest of El Elyon of Jerusalem, whom Abraham recognized.<sup>33</sup> Ringgren is of the opinion that Jerusalem was a Canaanite cultic center, a shrine of El Elyon which the Israelites took over along with its cultic personnel. The story of Melchizedek and Abraham, therefore, is an indication of a compromise reached between the two religions.<sup>34</sup>

Those who regard the office of the priesthood as a later institution do not find any connection between the Zadokites and the Levites. To quote Ringgren, "In any case,

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<sup>33</sup>Genesis 14:18-20.

<sup>34</sup>Ringgren, Israelite Religion, pp. 60-61.

Zadok, the ancestor or at least nominal ancestor of the later Israelite priesthood, did not come from the tribe of Levi, as tradition asserts."<sup>35</sup> This is basically the approach of the Wellhausen school. The Wellhausen school finds the origin of the cleavage between priests and the Levites in Ezekiel's denunciation of the Levites.<sup>36</sup> The Aaronic priesthood stressed in the priestly code is, according to Wellhausen, a fiction, designed to give the priesthood an anchor in the Mosaic period. The genealogies in Chronicles, he says, are artificial attempts to link the sons of Zadok with Aaron and Eleazar.<sup>37</sup>

A closer examination of the Scriptures shows, however, that the Zadokites were Levites. It is true that little is known about Zadok's ancestry. From II Samuel 8:17 one learns that he was one of the priests who officiated in Jerusalem during the reign of David.<sup>38</sup> It was Zadok who anointed Solomon to be the King. Solomon appointed Zadok in the place of Abiathar. Thus, the house of Zadok occupied a prominent place in the Jerusalem priesthood and the Zadokite priesthood continued in Jerusalem until the destruction of the temple.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>35</sup>Ibid., p. 31.

<sup>36</sup>Ezekiel 44:4f.

<sup>37</sup>Hubbard, "Priests and Levites," p. 1032.

<sup>38</sup>cf. II Samuel 15:24-29; 20:25.

<sup>39</sup>I Kings 1:39; 2:35; II Chronicles 6:8.

II Samuel 15:24 seems to imply that Zadok was the head of a company of Levites. The Chronicler traces his descent to Eleazer, the third son of Aaron.<sup>40</sup> Thus it appears that in all probability the Zadokites were Levitical priests. Ezekiel's denunciation of the Levites, then, should be taken as a denunciation of those idolatrous priests who became apostate and failed to discharge the normal duties of the priesthood.

The king and the cult. It has been observed that in the pagan religions of the ancient near east, the king occupied a very important role in cultic functions. Before the development of a systematized priestly hierarchy, the duties of the priest were discharged by the king. The king was regarded as having a sacramental status and therefore was the right intermediary to officiate in cultic functions.

However, in Israel the situation was different. A clear line of demarcation can be observed between the functions of the king and those of the priest. It should be pointed out that some scholars think that in Israel the king had some cultic functions. Some even go so far as to say that the Israelite king is a priest-king. Abba says, "Hebrew kingship is therefore sacral: the king is a priest-king, the mediator between God and his people."<sup>41</sup> A. S. Herbert also

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<sup>40</sup>I Chronicles 6:3-12, 50-53; 24:3.

<sup>41</sup>Abba, "Priests and Levites," p. 882.



is of the opinion that the king was the supreme figure in Israel's cultus. He states: "The king's role in the cultus, then, was to offer those sacrifices and perform those acts which affect the total life of Israel."<sup>42</sup>

It is true that during the monarchy the priesthood did not function as an autonomous institution; it was subservient to the king. The king served as a patron of the temple and its cult, and consequently the status and authority of the priest increased during the monarchy. There are indications that on occasions the kings officiated at certain ceremonies. King Saul, in the absence of Samuel, offered burnt offerings and peace offerings at Gilgal, but was rebuked by Samuel for doing so.<sup>43</sup> David officiated at the installation of the ark in Jerusalem.<sup>44</sup> It also appears that David appointed his sons to be priests.<sup>45</sup> This interpretation, however, is not accepted by all. Abba observes that the word לֵוִי used in this context may denote a domestic chaplain or it may have been used as a court title as is king's friend, although elsewhere it is used exclusively of priests. Some suggest that לֵוִי should be emended to לֵוִי , "steward" or

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<sup>42</sup>A. S. Herbert, Worship in Ancient Israel (Richmond, Virginia: John Knox Press, 1959), p. 35.

<sup>43</sup>I Samuel 13:8-13; 14:35.

<sup>44</sup>II Samuel 6:12-19.

<sup>45</sup>II Samuel 8:18.

"administrator." It is also to be observed that the Chronicler alters the reference to David's sons from כהן to המלך, the "chief officials in the service of the king." The Septuagint substitutes αὐλαρχαί, "princes" for כהנים in II Samuel 8:18.<sup>46</sup> It is therefore difficult to assert that David's sons were priests in the true sense of the term.

Apparently King Solomon exercised some priestly functions in connection with the dedication of the temple. He is seen standing before the altar to offer the prayer of dedication, sacrificing sheep and oxen, and blessing the congregation of Israel.<sup>47</sup> There are also indications that Jeroboam and Ahaz exercised some priestly functions.<sup>48</sup> On the other hand Uzziah's attempt to burn incense in the temple was considered a flagrant encroachment on the rights of the priesthood, and the king was consequently stricken with leprosy.<sup>49</sup> The king virtually disappeared from the restored cultus of the temple envisaged in the book of Ezekiel.

While it is true that some kings were patrons of the official religion in Israel, one cannot assert that the role

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<sup>46</sup>Abba, loc. cit.

<sup>47</sup>I Kings 8:5-63.

<sup>48</sup>I Kings 12:32,33; II Kings 16:10-13.

<sup>49</sup>II Chronicles 26:16-20.

of the king was that of the priest. There existed a clear distinction between the duties of the king and those of the priest. The king concerned himself with the temporal affairs of the state, while the priest functioned as the religious leader of the nation.

The duties of the Hebrew priest. The duties of the Hebrew priest were many. As the Israelites grew from a small community of people to a socially and politically organized nation, the task of the priesthood increased proportionately. Nevertheless, the basic functions of the Hebrew priesthood remained the same. The basic pattern of the priestly ministry is outlined in the blessings of Moses:

And of Levi he said, Let thy Thummim and thy Urim be with thy holy one, whom thou didst prove at Mas-sah, and with whom thou didst strive at the waters of Meribah...They shall teach Jacob thy judgments, and Israel thy law: they shall put incense before thee, and whole burnt sacrifice upon thine altar.<sup>50</sup>

The book of Leviticus is an enlargement of the functions of the priesthood. The following are the main functions of the priesthood.

1. Representation. The work of representation is foremost among the many functions of the priest. Priesthood and covenant are closely related in the Bible. As the covenant people of God, Israel was to be "a kingdom of priests and a

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<sup>50</sup>Deuteronomy 33:8-10.

holy nation."<sup>51</sup> Keeping the covenant meant consecration on the part of the nation. The holiness of God demanded holiness from the people.<sup>52</sup> The covenant made with the nation as a whole was represented in the priesthood. Abba makes this comment on the theological significance of the Israelite priesthood:

The Levitical priesthood has therefore a representative character: it embodies the duty, as well as the honor and privileges, of the whole nation as a covenant people of God. Corporate responsibility must of necessity be delegated to representative persons, who discharge it on behalf of the community as a whole. Hence in public and national worship the priests act as the representatives of the people.<sup>53</sup>

H. W. Robinson also makes the observation:

The holy priesthood is set apart as representing the people. The representation finds fullest expression in the person of the high priest. He bears the names of the twelve tribes on his shoulders and breast. (Exodus 28:12-22).<sup>54</sup>

Thus the priest was the divinely chosen and consecrated person who represented the whole nation before Jehovah. His task was to maintain the holiness of the elect people of God. The Levitical priesthood, by virtue of its divine choice,

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<sup>51</sup>Exodus 19:5,6.

<sup>52</sup>Leviticus 11:44f.; Numbers 15:40.

<sup>53</sup>Abba, op. cit., p. 877.

<sup>54</sup>H. W. Robinson, The Religious Ideas of the Old Testament (London: Gerald Duckworth and Company, Ltd., 1913), p. 141.

became the mediator of the covenant with Israel.<sup>55</sup> Israel was able to serve God and receive His blessings through the priesthood.

2. Offering of sacrifices. The offering of sacrifices was another function of the priesthood. The service at the altar was the exclusive right of the priests. Before the institution of the priesthood proper, sacrifices were made by the head of the family (as illustrated in the story of the passover. But since the consecration of the priests, sacrifices were offered by the priests. Any violation in this respect was considered a sin of presumption.

The sacrificial system maintained by Israel is described in the first seven chapters of the book of Leviticus. Both the offerer and the priest had certain functions. Rowley thinks that the role of the priest in connection with the sacrifice was chiefly to attend to the disposal of the blood of the sacrificial victim.<sup>56</sup> Leviticus shows, however, that the priestly functions included such things as judging the sacrificial victim, sprinkling the blood upon the altar and burning the sacrifice on the altar.<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>55</sup>Exodus 28:38; Leviticus 10:17; Numbers 18:1; Malachi 2:4ff.

<sup>56</sup>Rowley, Worship in Ancient Israel, p. 101.

<sup>57</sup>Leviticus 1:7,8,15.

The Israelites had several sacrifices. The most important of these were the burnt offering, the meal (meat) offering, the peace offering, the sin offering and the trespass offering.<sup>58</sup> The offerings were of two kinds: free will offerings and expiatory sacrifices. Atonement through the blood of the sacrificial victim is a dominant idea of the Old Testament. "For the life of the flesh is in the blood: and I have given it to you upon the altar to make an atonement for your souls: for it is the blood that maketh an atonement for the soul."<sup>59</sup> The observance of the "day of atonement" is suggestive of the importance of this concept. On this day the high priest, arrayed in special priestly garments, would enter the holy place to sprinkle the blood on and before the mercy seat to make atonement for the whole nation.<sup>60</sup> The sanctity and the covenant relationship of the nation was thus maintained through the sacrifices offered by the priests on behalf of the entire nation.

3. Giving oracles. The priests were responsible for giving the oracles of God to the people. Israel was basically a theocratic society, and as such the people were guided and controlled by God. Even during the period of the monarchy,

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<sup>58</sup>Leviticus 1:1-7:21.

<sup>59</sup>Leviticus 17:11.

<sup>60</sup>Leviticus 16:1-34.

the kings inquired of the Lord concerning matters of crucial importance. The priest was the person to turn to for guidance from Yahweh. Both individuals and kings approached the priest to "enquire of Yahweh."<sup>61</sup>

How the priests discerned the will of God is a matter of dispute among the scholars. Some, like Herbert, think that this was done through rites of divination (as did the Arabic Kahin).<sup>62</sup> However, the Scriptures do not teach that the priests indulged in any such practice even though Vaux says that the priests consulted God by means of the "ephod" and of the "Urim" and "Thummim."<sup>63</sup>

That the Levites would be the custodians of Urim and Thummim is spoken by Moses in his final blessings.<sup>64</sup> But, what they were or how the priests used them to discover God's will is not certain. Vaux suggests that Urim and Thummim were like small pebbles or dice and that they were kept in the ephod.<sup>65</sup>

Although it is not known exactly how the priest was able to discern God's will and make it known to people, it

<sup>61</sup>I Samuel 1:17; 2:20; 22:10-15.

<sup>62</sup>Herbert, Worship in Ancient Israel, p. 37.

<sup>63</sup>Vaux, Ancient Israel, p. 350.

<sup>64</sup>Deuteronomy 33:8.

<sup>65</sup>Vaux, op. cit., p. 351.

is clear that he was the right person to approach for the purpose of oracles. It appears that this function of the priest declined after the reign of David.

4. Custodian of the temple. Another function of the priest was that of guarding the sanctuary. During the wilderness journey the sons of Aaron were posted in front of the tent to prevent the people from entering it.<sup>66</sup> It was the duty of the priests to take care of all the sacred objects of the sanctuary. During the time of David, Zadok and Abiathar were in charge of the ark of the Lord.<sup>67</sup> As custodians of the sanctuary, the priests had solemn responsibility for conducting the worship of Yahweh.

5. Teaching. A very important duty of the priest was to teach the people the laws of God. These laws included the following: the laws of sacrifice, the apodeictic law, laws of health and sanitation as well as the moral laws of God. The priest had to be an expert in the law. He functioned as the depository of the law and was able to give advice to men on any ritualistic matter. He had to be faithful in guarding the torah as well as proclaiming the covenant of Jehovah to Israel.<sup>68</sup> Clear guidance was

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<sup>66</sup>Numbers 3:38.

<sup>67</sup>II Samuel 15:24-29.

<sup>68</sup>Deuteronomy 27:14ff.; 17:18; 27:9.



was expected from the priest in sacral and ethical matters. In addition, the priest had to serve as a judge in legal disputes. As the nation grew and was organized, some of these functions were distributed to others, but the priest still remained as an authority in several matters, and his teaching was accepted by the masses of people.

6. Blessing the people. The priest was to bless the congregation of Israel. The formula of blessing is found in Numbers 6:24-26:

The Lord bless thee, and keep thee:  
The Lord make his face shine upon thee, and be  
gracious unto thee: The Lord lift up his countenance upon thee, and give thee peace.

It can be observed that the priest functioned in a double capacity. In the acts of sacrifice and worship he represented the people; in the act of blessing, he represented God. The mediatorial function of the priest is nowhere so clear as in these acts. The priest was indeed a man who stood between God and the people.

Conclusions. The origin, nature and functions of the Hebrew priesthood have been examined. Unlike the priests of the pagan religions, the priests of Israel were specially chosen by God to carry out the task of bringing the covenant people of God to a closer relationship with Him.

## CHAPTER V

### A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF THE TWO PRIESTHOODS

So far this study has examined the Canaanite priesthood and the Hebrew priesthood separately. The attempt in this chapter is to bring the two systems together so as to make some evaluations in terms of similarities as well as differences. The procedure involves a comparative study of the two priesthoods.

#### I. CULTIC AFFINITIES BETWEEN UGARIT AND ISRAEL

A comparative study of the two priestly systems shows that there are certain points of similarities between the two. The following are the most outstanding ones.

The concept of mediation. It is clear that both in the Canaanite religion and in the Hebrew religion, the priest was regarded as the medium through which men could approach the deities. There was an awesome sense of estrangement between the worshiper and the deities in Canaanite religion, and this gap could be bridged only through special cultic officials whose task it was to bring the worshipers to their gods. While it is true, as Orlinsky points out, that many of these priests "strove to make the religions and mythological thinking of the the people serve their own ends,"<sup>1</sup> the people looked upon them as

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<sup>1</sup>Orlinsky, Ancient Israel, p. 15.

the only qualified men to approach for oracles and divine guidance. The role of the king in cultic matters and his function as the mediator of the people have been sufficiently dealt with in an earlier chapter. To quote Gray, "As mediators of oracles, then, the king concentrated in his person the offices of prophet and priest..."<sup>2</sup>

The Hebrew priest had a similar function. The God of Israel was such a holy God that the common man dared not to approach Him. A consecrated holy priesthood was therefore a psychological as well as a theological necessity. The separation of the tribe of Levi fulfilled this basic need, and Israel was thus able to have communion with her Maker through the medium of the priesthood. By virtue of their calling and consecration, the priests of Israel were able to represent the whole nation before the Lord.<sup>3</sup> It should also be said that in the early stage of Israel's history the priest discharged the duties of a prophet by communicating the divine will to the people.

The priestly hierarchy. In Israel and Ugarit, one observes the existence of a priestly hierarchy. In the case of the Canaanite religion this was the result of a process of development. Priestly functions were at first

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<sup>2</sup>Gray, The Legacy of Canaan, p. 210.

<sup>3</sup>Exodus 28:12.

discharged by the king but eventually a powerful priestly class came into existence and assumed priestly functions. The mention of several priestly families in the Ras Shamra texts indicate that there was in Ugarit a well developed cultic establishment.<sup>4</sup> Orlinsky says that the priests constituted an important and powerful group in the upper class of Canaanite society and that they were land owners, slave owners and money lenders.<sup>5</sup> The priests enjoyed many privileges such as high pay and free use of land.<sup>6</sup> The mention of Atn Prnl as high priest shows that there was in Ugarit a priestly hierarchy headed by the high priest and constituted of the priestly families. Priesthood was also hereditary.

There existed a priestly class and a hierarchy in Israel also. The Wellhausen school, of course, likes to think that the development of the priesthood did not take place until the exile and that the references to priesthood in the Pentateuch are projections into the past from a later period in order to validate the office of the priest. The concern here is not to establish the antiquity of the Pentateuch, but, proceeding on the assumption that the materials in the Pentateuch are much older than critical scholars admit them

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<sup>4</sup>Gray, op. cit., p. 212.

<sup>5</sup>Orlinsky, Ancient Israel, p. 54.

<sup>6</sup>Gordon, Ugaritic Literature, p. 122.

to be, one finds that, from the wilderness period itself, there was a priestly hierarchy with different duties assigned to the sons of Aaron and the rest of the Levites. It is true, however, that in the course of the history of the Israelites, the priesthood underwent some changes in terms of status and function, but the basic structure remained the same. Throughout the history of Israel, the office of the priesthood was held by the members of the tribe of Levi.

Sacrificial system. Another point of similarity between the Canaanite religion and the religion of Israel is the existence of a sacrificial system.

That the Canaanite cult involved the rites of sacrifices is attested by the Ras Shamra texts as well as by other archaeological evidences. The Keret and the Aqhat epics make clear that both Daniel and Keret made offerings to the deities. The offering included such items as a lamb, a bird, honey and wine.<sup>7</sup> A great deal has been said by scholars today about the Canaanite practice of sacrificing infants to the deity called Moloch. While it is true that there are traces of human sacrifice practiced by the Moabites and the Aramaeans of Gozan, it is difficult to assert that the same is also true of Ugarit. W. F. Albright in his recent book Yahweh and the Gods of Canaan discusses this problem

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<sup>7</sup>Ibid., p. 71.

and concludes that there is little evidence for Moloch sacrifice in Ugarit.<sup>8</sup> On the basis of the Ugaritic texts, it is rather difficult to say how well established their sacrificial system was. Albright makes this observation:

We have almost no description of ritual in the entire Ugaritic literature. What we have consists chiefly of lists of gods and offerings, as well as later sacrificial tariffs,<sup>9</sup> none of which can be found in the Pentateuch.

In Israel, sacrifices formed an integral part of worship. Even before the Sinaitic covenant, there were evidences of the practice of sacrifice. The first recorded sacrifice is that of Cain and Abel, the sons of Adam.<sup>10</sup> The patriarchs are seen building altars and making offerings to Jehovah.<sup>11</sup> With the organization of the Hebrews under the Sinaitic covenant, sacrifices became the main means of approach to God in worship. The laws of sacrifice, outlined in Leviticus, have been dealt with in the preceding chapter, but suffice it to say that sacrifice constituted a major part in the worship of Israel.

The king and the cult. The role of the king in the Canaanite cult is obvious. The king was, by his very nature,

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<sup>8</sup>W. F. Albright, Yahweh and the Gods of Canaan (Garden City, New York: Doubleday and Company, Inc., 1968), p. 241.

<sup>9</sup>Ibid., p. 194.

<sup>10</sup>Genesis 4:3-5.

<sup>11</sup>Genesis 12:8; 26:25; 31:54.

a priest. Any action of the king therefore had an influence on the whole society. The Keret epic reveals Keret as the scion of Ltpn and Qds.<sup>12</sup> By virtue of his sacramental relationship, the king is able to mediate the divine influence to his subjects. The king may perform sacrifices or discern the will of the gods through the rite of incubation or other means. The establishment of priestly families did not bar the king from exercising priestly functions. It appears from the Keret texts that King Keret belonged to the tribe of T (a priestly tribe) and as such, one might infer that the king, as well as members of his clan, had important functions in the cult and its ritual.<sup>13</sup>

The kings of Israel had some connection with the cult. The outstanding names which can be linked with the religion of Israel are those of David and Solomon. It was King David who made Jerusalem his capital as well as the religious center of the nation. It was through his efforts that the magnificent temple was built (although Solomon actually built it). It was King David who appointed different orders of priests and singers for the worship of the sanctuary.<sup>14</sup> King Solomon continued in the same tradition. He officiated

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<sup>12</sup>Gordon, Ugaritic Literature, p. 66.

<sup>13</sup>Ibid., p. 122.

<sup>14</sup>I Chronicles 16:4-6; 22:1-5; 24:1-31.

at the ceremony of the dedication of the temple and exhorted the people to be loyal to the God of Israel.<sup>15</sup> During the period that followed the reign of Solomon, the kingdom was divided and many pagan practices crept into the religion of the Hebrews. But every time the nation (including the priests of Jehovah) was on the brink of apostasy, godly kings like Hezekiah and Josiah rose to effect a national revival and the restoration of the proper worship of Jehovah.<sup>16</sup> Had it not been for the patronizing influences of kings such as these, the religious history of the nation of Israel would have been totally different.

Priest and war. The priests of Ugarit (at least some of them) were engaged in some military functions. While it is not clear in what capacity they served, the administrative texts indicate that they were attached to the army. Gordon holds that their position was one of command.<sup>17</sup> It is not wrong to assume that some of them served as army officers, holding strategic positions.

The association of priests with battle was not a foreign thought to Israel's religion. On different occasions the priest served as warriors. The role of the priests in

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<sup>15</sup>II Chronicles 6:12-7:22.

<sup>16</sup>II Chronicles 29, 30, 34, 35.

<sup>17</sup>Gordon, Ugaritic Literature, p. 125.



the conquest of Jericho is a supreme example of this fact.<sup>18</sup> During the battle between Israel and the Philistines, the sons of Eli, the priest, appeared in the battle field along with the ark, hoping to promote victory for Israel.<sup>19</sup> Similarly, King Saul took Ahija the priest to the battle field with the hope of receiving divine oracles.<sup>20</sup> It was also customary for the kings of Israel to consult the priests or the prophets before waging a war against the enemies.<sup>21</sup>

Priests and teaching. Both in Israel and in Ugarit the priests had the unique role of teaching. For the Canaanite priest, this meant being a custodian of traditions and myths. Ras Shamra texts indicate that Atn Prnl taught the Baal myth. Thus one is able to see how traditions were preserved and transmitted to the succeeding generation. It can be said that in the ancient near east "oral and written traditions were not mutually exclusive but both processes might go on pari-passu..."<sup>22</sup>

Similarly, priests in Israel were custodians and teachers of the law. The teaching function of the Levitical priests is clearly enunciated in the book of Leviticus.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>18</sup>Joshua 6:1-16.

<sup>19</sup>I Samuel 4:1-11.

<sup>20</sup>I Samuel 14:3.

<sup>21</sup>I Kings 22:5f.

<sup>22</sup>Gray, The Legacy of Canaan, p. 216.

<sup>23</sup>Leviticus 10:11.

They were the custodians and authoritative interpreters of the Mosaic law. Critical scholars believe that the legal portions of the Pentateuch were composed by the priestly school. It is interesting to note in this context that several of the Psalms are ascribed to the Levitical Asaphites or the Korahites. Whether these terms designate actual authorship or not is hard to explain. At least it can be said that the priests had a unique role in transmitting the traditions, literary or oral, by way of teaching.

## II. BASIC DIFFERENCES

A comparative study involves a study of the points of similarities as well as striking contrasts. The points of similarities discussed above make critical scholars think that the Hebrews had nothing in their religion which they could claim as their own, but that they borrowed everything en bloc from the Canaanites. A closer examination, however, reveals that the so-called similarities are only superficial and that the very points of similarities can be lifted up to show the radical differences between the religion of the Canaanites and the religion of the Hebrews. Some of the most striking differences between the two religions are as follows:

The sacredness of the Hebrew priesthood. Unlike the Ugaritic priesthood, sacredness and sanctity were attached to the Hebrew priesthood. Primarily, this was due

to the fact that the office of the priesthood was instituted by Jehovah Himself. Members of the tribe of Levi did not choose to become priests; rather, Jehovah chose them to this office.<sup>24</sup> The qualifications of the candidates to priesthood are outlined clearly in several passages.<sup>25</sup> They included physical and spiritual qualifications. The priesthood was a holy priesthood, as is clear from the command:

They shall be holy unto their God, and not profane the name of their God: for the offerings of the Lord made by fire, and the bread of their God they do offer: therefore they shall be holy.<sup>26</sup>

The sacredness of the priesthood is further exemplified by the rites of consecration. On the day Aaron and his sons were consecrated to the office of the priesthood, they were washed with water and clothed with special priestly robes; there followed the anointing with oil and the application of blood.<sup>27</sup> This ritual of purification and consecration symbolized the holy office held by the priests of Israel. They were a sanctified priesthood, separated for the service of Jehovah. They were to maintain ritual and moral purity throughout their entire period of ministry. Any deviation was punishable by death.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>24</sup>Exodus 28:1.

<sup>25</sup>Leviticus 10; 21:1-22:13.

<sup>26</sup>Leviticus 21:6 (KJV).

<sup>27</sup>Leviticus 9:1-36.

<sup>28</sup>Nadab and Abihu, the sons of Aaron, offered "strange fire before the Lord" and were immediately burned to death by fire that came from the Lord (Leviticus 10:1-11).

It is clear then, that the priesthood of Israel was a holy office which originated and functioned in accordance with the divine will of Jehovah. The priests were chosen of God to represent the entire nation before Him in acts of worship and service. There is no equal of this relationship in the religion of the Canaanites.

Difference in terminology. It has been pointed out that the Canaanites used different terms to designate the different orders of the priesthood. These included such terms as Knm, Nqdm, Qdsm and Knrm. The Ras Shamra documents do not give much light concerning the nature and functions of these cultic persons. Nevertheless, many scholars think that some of these priests were associated with divination and sexual immorality.

It is significant that the Bible uses only the word Khn to refer to the priests of Israel. The word כֹּהֵן (Kmr) is used in the Bible for idolatrous priests.<sup>29</sup> Similarly, זִמְרָן (qds) is used for temple-prostitutes (Sodomites).<sup>30</sup> But the priests of Jehovah are always referred to as Kohen. In view of the immorality and idolatry practiced by the pagan priests (as expressed by the terms qds and kemarim), is it any accident that the Bible uses only Kohen

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<sup>29</sup> II Kings 23:5; Hosea 10:5; Zephaniah 1:4.

<sup>30</sup> Deuteronomy 23:18; I Kings 14:24; 22:47; 15:12; II Kings 23:7; Job 36:14.

for the Hebrew priests. The priests of Jehovah, according to the Bible, had to be free from all types of impurities. They were constantly under the divine imperative, "...ye shall therefore sanctify yourselves, and ye shall be holy; for I am holy..."<sup>31</sup>

No woman priests in Israel. Another distinctive feature of the religion of the Hebrews is the absence of female cultic officials. The Ras Shamra documents indicate that some women were associated with the cult. It is not certain, however, what their role was in the cult. Judging from the general nature of the Canaanite fertility cult, one might assume that these women were "devoted" persons who had given themselves over to the rite of sacred prostitution. Noth equates these women to the Qedheshoth ( קדשות ) of the Old Testament.<sup>32</sup>

It is significant that the Israelites never had any women-priests (though they had women who served in the capacities of judge and queen). Priesthood was the exclusive right of the male members of the tribe of Levi. Also, interestingly, the priest was to marry only a chaste woman:

And he shall take a wife in her virginity. A widow, or a divorced woman, or profane, or an harlot, these shall he not take: but he shall take a virgin

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<sup>31</sup>Leviticus 11:44 (KJV).

<sup>32</sup>Noth, The Old Testament World, p. 281.

of his own people to wife.<sup>33</sup>

Where can one find such moral excellence in the religion of the Canaanites?

No priest-king in Israel. In Ugarit the king was also the priest of the community. There was, therefore, no clear distinction between the "sacred" and the "secular." The king had authority over the secular and the religious spheres.

Turning to Israel, one finds that this concept of the priest-king is lacking. In the Bible the only one who combined the two offices of the king and the priest in his person was Melchizedek. The kings of Israel, despite the fact that some of them are depicted as supporters of the religion and as participants in the temple worship, did not dare to encroach upon the prerogatives of the priest. Kings like Saul and Uzziah, who failed to conform to this law, met with severe penalty.<sup>34</sup> The king discharged the duties of a civil ruler, whereas the priest functioned as the authority in religious matters. Significantly, no one from the tribe of Levi ever became a king in Israel. Therefore, one is justified in saying that there was in Israel a distinction

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<sup>33</sup>Leviticus 21:13,14 (KJV).

<sup>34</sup>I Samuel 13:8-14; II Chronicles 26:14-21.

between "church" and "state."<sup>35</sup>

The significance of sacrifice in Israel. Some scholars have attempted to prove that the Israelite sacrificial system was borrowed from the Canaanite sacrificial system. Their argument, based mainly on the punie sacrificial list,<sup>36</sup> has been refuted by Vawter, Vaux and others.

For the Hebrews, sacrifice had a special significance. It was through the shed blood of the sacrificial victim that their sins had to be atoned. The blood of the sacrifice, therefore, had a special importance to them. It was through the blood of the paschal lamb that they were redeemed from Egyptian bondage.<sup>37</sup> The atonement effected by the blood of the sacrificial victim is clearly expressed in the passage:

For the life of the flesh is in the blood: and I have given it to you upon the altar to make an atonement for your souls: for it<sup>38</sup> is the blood that maketh an atonement for the soul.

This concept of atonement and redemption by blood is peculiar to the Hebrew religion. Further, the New Testament teaches that the Old Testament sacrifices were but shadows or types of the great sacrifice of the Son of God on the

<sup>35</sup> Pfeiffer, Ras Shamra and the Bible, p. 39.

<sup>36</sup> Ringgren, Israelite Religion, p. 167.

<sup>37</sup> Exodus 12.

<sup>38</sup> Leviticus 17:11 (KJV).

cross of Calvary.<sup>39</sup>

Vaux says that "the Bible and inscriptions coming from Phoenicia proper do not say that the Canaanites knew of expiatory sacrifices."<sup>40</sup> On the basis of these evidences, it can be asserted that the Israelites alone knew of a sacrificial system whereby they could experience cleansing from sin and union with God. As the one who offered the sacrifices on the altar, the Israelite priest played a unique role in the religious life of the community.

Concluding observations. The study of the Hebrew priesthood and the Canaanite priesthood, in terms of similarities and differences, shows that there is a polarity between the religion of the Hebrews and the religion of the Canaanites. The so-called similarities are only superficial, but the differences are radical. Any theory that seeks to explain the origin of Israel's religion in terms of a natural phenomenon does not do justice to the biblical account of the Hebrew religion. The answer to the uniqueness of Israel's religion must be found elsewhere.

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<sup>39</sup>John 1:29; Hebrews 9:12-28.

<sup>40</sup>Vaux, Studies in Old Testament Sacrifice, p. 110.



## CHAPTER VI

## CONCLUSION

The study of the Canaanite priesthood and the Hebrew priesthood has yielded some valuable insights into the nature of the two religions. The Canaanite religion, despite the fact that the Canaanite civilization was higher than that of the Israelites, was based on the fertility cult. Among the cultic officials, the king had a unique place. There was in ancient Canaan a priestly hierarchy headed by the high priest. The priestly functions included such duties as mediation, offering of sacrifices and guarding the traditions. The office of the priesthood was a developing institution in ancient Canaan.

Turning to the religion of Israel, one finds that the Hebrew priesthood was a divinely appointed office. The tribe of Levi was chosen by Jehovah for the priestly ministry. There was, however, a distinction between the family of Aaron and the rest of the members of the tribe of Levi. During the monarchical period, the Hebrew priesthood enjoyed the patronage of several kings including David and Solomon, though there was a clear distinction between the "sacred" and the "secular." The basic function of the Hebrew priesthood was that of representing the entire nation before Jehovah in acts of worship and service. The priest also

served in the capacity of a judge, a teacher and a guide.

A comparative study of the two priestly systems leads one to the conclusion that there are several points of similarities as well as differences between the two priesthoods. The high moral and spiritual nature of the Hebrew priesthood, as opposed to the moral laxity of the Canaanite priesthood, makes one ask such questions as: Does the Hebrew priesthood betray any Canaanite influence? How can the uniqueness of the Hebrew religion be explained? This is the concern of this concluding chapter.

#### I. DOES THE HEBREW PRIESTHOOD BETRAY RELIGIOUS SYNCRETISM?

The question of Canaanite influence upon the religion of Israel has been attempted by many scholars. It appears that there is an increasing tendency on the part of many liberal scholars, despite archaeological and other evidences, to show that almost all ingredients of the religion of Israel were simply borrowed from the Canaanites. Consequently, a great deal has been said about religious "syncretism" and "Canaanization," with reference to the religion of Israel. G. W. Ahlstrom makes this statement about Canaanite influence on Israel: "The cultus, in common with the culture, was 'Canaanized': not merely tolerated but accepted as being a necessity in the Canaanite milieu."<sup>1</sup> Such thinking inevitably leads one to the

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<sup>1</sup>G. W. Ahlstrom, Aspects of Syncretism in Israelite Religion (London: C. W. K. Gleerup, 1963), p. 88.

conclusion that the religion of Israel was no different from the pagan religions about her and that Israel had no unique qualities of her own.

This notion is indeed a fallacy. The Bible makes it clear that from the beginning there was a sharp tension between the religion of Baal and the religion of Yahweh. Wright points out that the "Old Testament bears eloquent witness to the fact that Canaanite religion was the most dangerous and disintegrative factor which the faith of Israel had to face."<sup>2</sup> It was, therefore, no accident that God gave to the Israelites the clear injunction regarding their attitude to the religion of the Canaanites. Israel was strictly warned not to adopt the customs and idolatrous practices of their pagan neighbors.

After the doings of the land of Egypt, wherein ye dwelt, shall ye not do: and after the doings of the land of Canaan, whither I bring you, shall ye not do: neither shall ye walk in their ordinances.

Defile not ye yourselves in any of these things: for in all these the nations are defiled which I cast out before you:

Therefore shall ye keep mine ordinance, that ye commit not any one of these abominable customs, which were committed before you, and that ye defile not yourselves therein. I am the Lord your God.

And ye shall not walk in the manners of the nation, which I cast out before you: for they committed all these things, and therefore I abhorred them.

And ye shall be holy unto me: for I the Lord am holy, and have severed you from other people, that ye should be mine.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup>Wright, The Old Testament Against Its Environment, p. 13.

<sup>3</sup>Leviticus 18:3,24,30; 20:23 (KJV).

It should be noted here that Leviticus 18-20 contains many prohibitions for the Israelites with regard to the "abominable" customs and practices of the land of Canaan. The fact that the Israelites were warned not to adopt these practices is certainly indicative of the sublime nature of their religion. Israel was to be a peculiar people consecrated to the service of Jehovah. It is also clear from the Old Testament that the very purpose of Israel's election and covenant with Yahweh was that the nation should be "a light to the nations" around about.

This does not mean, however, that the Israelites were faithful to the Lord who had brought them out of Egypt and made them a covenanted-nation. Although they were commanded by God to exterminate the Canaanites upon their entry into the land, they failed to carry out this order. The conquest of the land under Joshua was in no wise a complete one. Joshua 17 makes it clear that these Canaanites who could not be conquered dwelt in the land along with the Israelites. The consequence of this incomplete conquest was that, gradually, several Canaanite practices crept into the religious life of the community and the Canaanite gods became "a snare" to the Israelites.<sup>4</sup> The apostasy and the moral degradation of the Israelites during the period of the Judges are

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<sup>4</sup>Judges 2:3.

expressed in these tragic words, "And they forsook the Lord, and served Baal and Ashtaroath."<sup>5</sup> The story of the Israelites, as presented in the book of Judges, is a story of failure—moral, spiritual and political failure. The existence of "high places," with sacred pillars and cultic objects, throughout the entire period of the monarchy is suggestive of the widespread influence of the Canaanite religion on the religion of the Hebrews.<sup>6</sup>

One cannot say, however, that there were no Israelites who were true and loyal to Jehovah. The story of the conflict between Baalism and the religion of Yahweh during the reign of Ahab, which led to the final conflict and subsequent triumph of the religion of Jehovah, reveals that the prophets of God like Elijah were zealous champions of the cause of God.<sup>7</sup> The prophets of Israel consistently denounced such practices as the worship of Baal and the worship of the "queen of heaven."<sup>8</sup> Because of the pious influence and preaching of the prophets of God, there was in Israel a faithful remnant whose knees had not bowed before

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<sup>5</sup>Judges 2:13.

<sup>6</sup>H. W. Robinson, The Religious Ideas of the Old Testament, p. 135.

<sup>7</sup>I Kings 18.

<sup>8</sup>Jeremiah 7:18 (cf. also 44:17,19,25). It is believed that this was the worship of either Anat or Astarte, the Canaanite goddesses.

Baal or other gods.<sup>9</sup> It is therefore wrong to suppose that the entire nation became apostate. The truth is that God always had a few who kept the covenant and displayed their loyalty to Him.

Thus one is brought back to the question of borrowing. The question, "Did Israel borrow the religious beliefs and practices of the Canaanites?" must be answered negatively. The Ras Shamra documents, which many scholars use to point out cultic affinities between Israel and the Canaanites, do not indicate any borrowing. Pfeiffer, who holds that there is a similarity in basic vocabulary and religious rites between the Israelites and the Canaanites, nevertheless admits that "there is no evidence of borrowing on the part of Israel or the Canaanites of Ugarit."<sup>10</sup> On the basis of the evidences from the Ras Shamra and the Bible, it can be said with confidence, at least with reference to the Hebrew priesthood, that there was no borrowing. It is interesting to note that Kaufmann, whose view of the Hebrew priesthood is far from being sound, agrees at this point when he says: "But it is a widespread misconception that temples and even priesthoods were taken over by Israel from their Canaanite predecessors."<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>9</sup>I Kings 19:18.

<sup>10</sup>Pfeiffer, Ras Shamra and the Bible, p. 39.

<sup>11</sup>Kaufmann, The Religion of Israel, p. 253.

## II. RELIGIOUS EVOLUTION OR DIVINE REVELATION?

While it is true that many liberal scholars hold that the Israelites borrowed aspects of the Canaanite religion, many of them are also willing to concede that there was a uniqueness about the religion of the Hebrews. They maintain that Israel "transformed" what she borrowed from her pagan environment. But how this transformation took place is left unexplained.

There are divergent approaches to the question of Israel's uniqueness. Only a few examples need to be cited:

1. Vaux says that "the originality of Yahwist religion is a consequence of its moralism."<sup>12</sup>

2. Kenyon believes that the Israelites adopted the culture of the Canaanites, but that they emerged from it later. She says, "it was the cohesive power of their religion that caused them eventually to emerge from it as an entity that has contributed so much to humanity."<sup>13</sup>

3. Mendenhall explains the uniqueness of Israel in terms of the historical method: "It was this religious affirmation of the value of historical events which is still felt to be the unique feature of Israelite faith..."<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>12</sup>Vaux, Studies in Old Testament Sacrifice, p. 112.

<sup>13</sup>Kenyon, Amorites and Canaanites, p. 77.

<sup>14</sup>Mendenhall, "The Hebrew Conquest of Palestine," p. 74.

4. Albright, commenting on the importance of the Ras Shamra documents to the study of Hebrew literature, says:

...It is difficult to exaggerate the difference between the ethical monotheism of the Old Testament and the brutal coarseness of many polytheistic narratives in the newly discovered Canaanite literature. Between the religion of early Israel and that of the Canaanites there is a wide and deep gulf.<sup>15</sup>

However, he does not attempt to explain the "how" of the matter. The above cited examples are indications of honest and sincere attempts on the part of scholars to explain the originality of Israel's faith. Others seek to explain the uniqueness of Israel's religion in terms of growth and evolution. Any methodology, whether historical or archaeological or ethnological, that seeks to give a rationale for the originality of the religion of Israel, without taking into account the sublime truth of divine revelation, is bound to give a distorted image of Israel's religion.

The uniqueness of Israel is inseparably bound with the uniqueness of her God. The God of Israel was a transcendent God who disclosed Himself to the nation of Israel through redemptive acts and words. This divine disclosure elicited a response on the part of the Israelites; Israel entered into a covenant relationship with her God. This meant that Israel as a nation committed herself to the

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<sup>15</sup>Albright, "The Old Testament World," p. 259.



responsibility of keeping the holy ordinances of Jehovah. The biblical writer sums up this unique relationship in the following words, as spoken by Jehovah Himself:

For what nation is there so great, who hath God so nigh unto them, as the Lord our God is in all things that we call upon him for?

And what nation is there so great, that hath statutes and judgments so righteous as all this law, which I set before you this day?<sup>16</sup>

It is in this supernatural revelation of the nature of Jehovah that the answer to the problem of Israel's uniqueness lies. The correct methodology is therefore theological. Any other method that does not take this divine and supernatural element seriously adds only confusion instead of clarity concerning the nature of the religion of Israel.

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<sup>16</sup>Deuteronomy 4:7,8 (KJV).

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